ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY

THE BEST WILD WEST STORIES PUBLISHED

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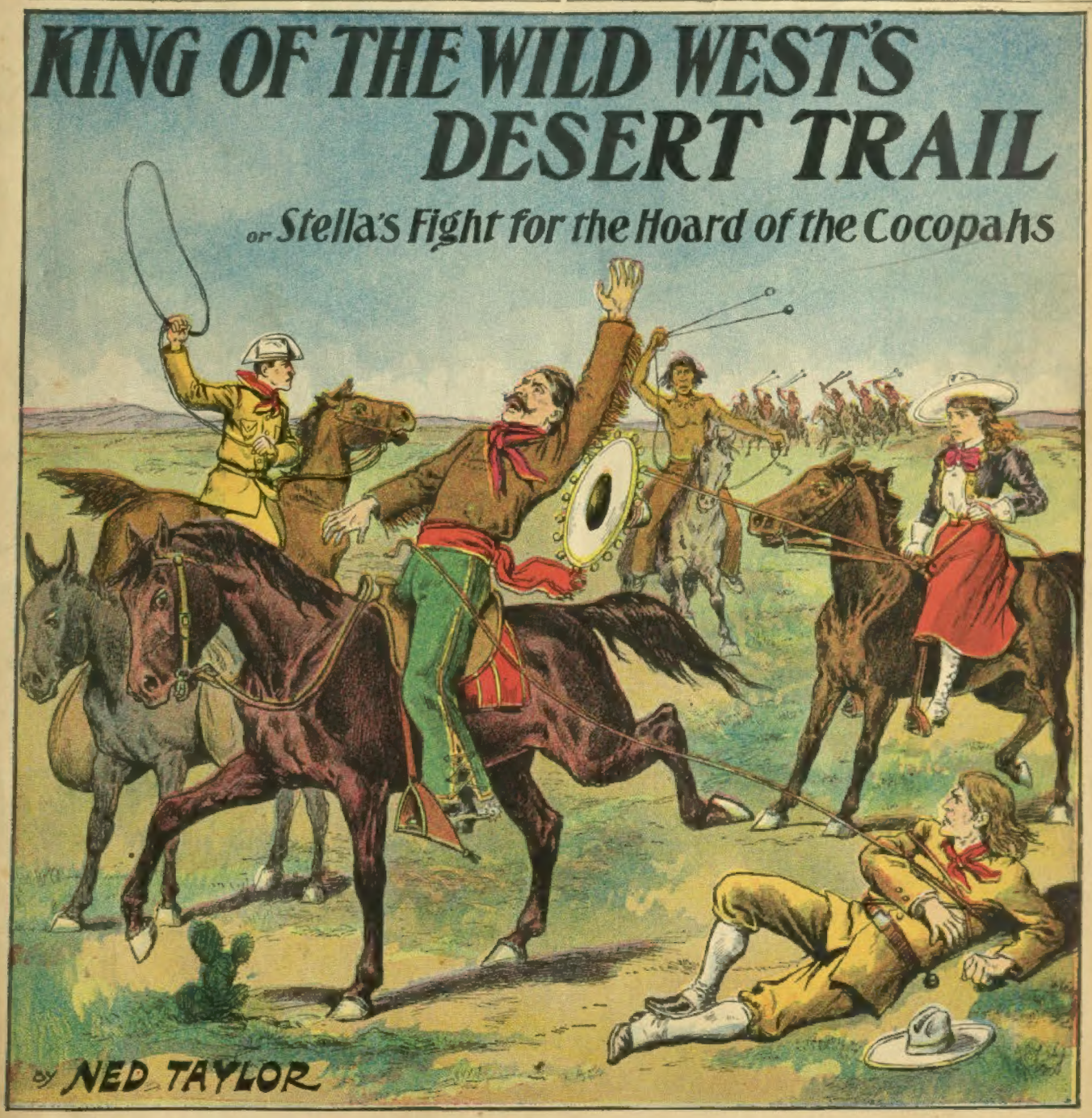
No. 168 NEW YORK, JULY 6, 1907. **Price, Five Cents**

KING OF THE WILD WEST'S DESERT TRAIL

or Stella's Fight for the Hoard of the Cocopahs



"Look out fer ther pesky rope, Ted!" shouted Bud Morgan, struggling to free himself, but watching the King of the Wild West as he made ready to use his riata.

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King of the Wild West's Desert Trail;

OR,

STELLA'S FIGHT FOR THE HOARD OF THE COCOPAHS.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

THE KID FROM NOWHERE.

"Are ye hot, kid?" asked the clerk of the Yuma Central Hotel, leaning across the counter, with a friendly grin.

The boy dropped a dusty little bundle, tied up in a red cotton handkerchief, kicked it under a chair, flopped down on the chair, and looked toward the clerk with an answering grin.

"Hot? *Me?* Oh, no. I'm the 'riginal human iceberg, I am." The youngster drew one tattered sleeve across his forehead, to mop up the sweat. "Jest thawin' out a little moisture, that's all. Mebby I could borry the loan of a pair o' ear-muffs, or a couple o' yarn mittens? No? Well, I ain't goin' to throw a fit 'cause you ain't got 'em.

"No, I ain't stringin' you—on the level. Every town I hit, on the line o' march, has given me a frost, an' you're the only hang-out handy-boy that's had anythin' for me but a frozen face. That ought to give a feller chilblains, hadn't it?"

"Playin' in hard luck, are ye, kid?" inquired the clerk smpathetically.

"Ole Johnny Hard Luck has been after me with a lead pipe ever since I was able to toddle. Oh, it's fierce! When a man gits to be ten years old, an' can't see nothin' behind him but a Jonahed life, an' nothin' ahead but a long blue-spell, you can't blame him for wonderin' why he ever happened, can you?"

"You don't seem partic'ler cast down, kid," commented the clerk.

"Gee! Say, you couldn't put me out o' the runnin' with a meat-ax. I'm a piece o' injy-rubber, that's what; no matter which way I'm pulled, I allers snap back inter place ag'in."

"Ye're a funny little son of a gun!"

"I ain't no funeral-percession. What's the use? Jest 'cause I got a knock comin', you don't hear me doin' the anvil-chorus. I'm wrestlin' Johnny Hard Luck ketch-as-ketch can, an' one o' these days I'll git him on the mat. Some time it's goin' to be my game o' muggins, see? Then watch my smoke!"

"Where you from, kid?"

"Nowhere; an' that's jest around the corner from everywhere, when you come to think about it."

"Where you goin'?"

"What do you label this place on the map?"

"Yuma."

"Then it's Yuma for mine till I find out whether the feller I'm lookin' for has hiked out an' got away from me."

"Then ye're lookin' fer some one?"

"Gee whiskers! Say, do I look like a dub that's been

rollin' around all outdoors jest fer the fun of the thing? Get wise!"

"Darned if you ain't a case! Who you tryin' to find?"

"The main springs o' the works, the high guy that ain't never yet let any one git the best o' him, the one-two-seven lad that's allers doin' things an' doin' 'em right, the flash-light warrior that totes the label o' Ted Strong—that's the boy. I've been lookin' for him for six months, an' I'm goin' to keep lookin' till I find him."

"King o' the Wild West, hey?" The clerk's face brightened.

"Keno! I got a steer, in the last town, that the King o' the Wild West an' his rough riders had hit this camp. Is he around any place?"

"Pulled out three days ago, kid——"

"Stung ag'in! Ain't I a mark? I been hit reg'lar in the same ole place for the last six months. Allers breeze inter a burg jest far enough behind Ted Strong to miss connections."

"One of Ted Strong's pards is in town, though."

"Honest?"

"I'm givin' it to ye straight. Ted Strong's girl pard——"

"Stella Fosdick—an's she's a bird, if any one asks you. Where'll I find her?"

"Over to Abe Ruff's. Abe's one o' the prison-guards, an' Miss Fosdick knows his daughter Delia. When the rough riders pulled out, Miss Fosdick stayed behind fer a little visit with Delia Ruff."

"Gee! This ain't so rough on me as I thought it was goin' to turn out. Jest gi' me Delia's address, an' I'll hustle over. More'n likely Pard Stella'll know where Pard Ted is, and'll be kind enough to give Pard Jimmie a hunch as to the best way to overhaul him."

"Your name's Jimmie, is it?"

"Jimmie Walker, pal. I'm one o' the 'riginal walkers from Walkerville, an' that ain't no josh; an' I'll bet a jew's-harp agin' a rabbit's hind foot that I walked right inter my first piece o' luck when I walked inter this town o' Yuma. Oh, I dunno. If a feller hangs on by his teeth an' his eye-winkers, things are bound to come his way after a while."

"Well, look here, son," proceeded the clerk; "you go up the street to the first corner, turn to the left, go two blocks, an' ye'll see a big white house with green shutters."

"That's the house, is it?"

"Naw, that's Judge Randall's. On the corner beyand the judge's there's a stone house——"

"An' that's where Abe Ruff lives. I git you."

"Naw, that's Nate Hooper's. Turn to the left ag'in at Hooper's, an' on the next corner there's a two-story brick——"

"An' that ain't Ruff's, either. You're tellin' me where it ain't more times'n where it is."

"Yes, it is—that two-story brick is where Abe lives."

"Then it's me for the two-story brick!"

The boy got up, pulled his bundle out from under the chair, and started for the door. He was barefooted, his clothes were ragged, and there was but little more than the brim left of his straw hat. His feet were sore and bruised from much walking, and his brown, boyish face showed the pinch of hunger.

Nor was he a hardened character, in spite of the fact that he was "slangy." There was a certain manliness in his gray eyes, and there was something pathetic in his sturdy self-reliance.

"Hold yer broncks a minit, kid," called the clerk. "Ain't ye hungry?"

"That's a good warm guess, all right," answered Jimmie, halting and turning around with a grin. "I was born hungry, an' ain't never got filled up."

"Well, say, you go round to the kitchen, an' tell the Chink cook to give ye a hand-out; tell him I sent ye, see?"

"You're white, mister," said the grateful Jimmie. "It's me to the kitchen, hot-foot; an' when I'm through at Abe Ruff's, I'll come back here an' buck up some wood, to pay for the one square."

"Oh, ye needn't do that."

"I will, though. Mebby I'm a hobo, but I ain't that kind."

He went to the kitchen, told the Chinaman that the clerk had sent him, and then ate until the Chinaman's eyes nearly popped out of his head with wonder. Jimmie measured no more than five feet, but packed away enough chuck for a giant.

"Hoop-a-la!" muttered the astounded Celestial, looking at Jimmie as though he was one of the seven wonders. "Melican boy workee hocus-pocus. Where you puttee glub, hey?"

"Now ye see it, an' now ye don't, Charley," laughed Jimmie, pulling the hat-brim down on his shock of carroty hair. "That's more chuck than I've got outside of for a month, an' mebby this'll have to do me for another month. But you'll break even, all right. I'm comin' around this afternoon an' sail inter your woodpile. So-long."

Jimmie, feeling a hundred per cent. better, went to the first corner and turned to the left; he passed the white house with the green shutters, and turned to the left again at the stone house beyond. Presently he found himself in front of the two-story brick. On the veranda of this particular house was a hammock. Two girls were seated in the hammock.

Both girls were fine-looking, but only one of them caught Jimmie's eye. This particular girl wore a small white sombrero, a short red skirt, tan leggings, and about her trim waist was a cartridge-belt.

"Yi-yipee!" yelled the jubilant Jimmie, from the gate.

The girl in the sombrero jumped up from the hammock, as though some one had let off a twenty-inch gun right behind her.

"Why," she cried, "that sounds like our Moon Valley yell, Delia."

"Sure thing!" cried Jimmie, advancing along the walk and climbing the steps to the veranda. "I got it from one o' Ted Strong's punchers that crossed my trail a month or two ago. You're Stella Fosdick, the King o' the Wild West's girl pard, ain't you?"

"That's who I am, right enough," smiled Stella, stepping toward Jimmie, with hand outstretched; "but who are you?"

Jimmie gave her his name, and took her hand bashfully.

"You see," said Jimmie, "I'm one o' these dubs that's lookin' for help, the job I've copped out bein' too big to pull off by my lonesome. When I made up my mind to that, I got to thinkin' o' Ted Strong, an' sort o' wonderin' whether he'd lend a hand. Think the King o' the Wild West has got time to bother with a two-by-four case like

mine? Looks like I had my nerve right with me to ask him, don't it? But if——"

"Will you tell me what the work is, Jimmie?" Stella asked.

She was as favorably impressed with the lad as the hotel-clerk had been.

Jimmie looked around warily.

"It's kinder private, mum, this here bizness o' mine," said he.

"I'll go, Stella," said Delia, making a move to rise.

"No, Delia," Stella answered; "you stay right there, and I'll take Jimmie into the house. Come on," she added, with another smile in Jimmie's direction, and the two vanished through a door leading off the veranda.

When Stella came out, half an hour later, her eyes were red, and she came alone. Jimmie's dusty little figure was stretched out on a couch, and he was sound asleep. Stella went at once to a telegraph-office, and sent the following message:

"TED STRONG, Salton, California.

"Please meet me Campo, Cal., soon as possible. A desert trail, and a chance to right a great wrong.

"STELLA."

CHAPTER II.

AN UNEXPECTED SET-TO.

"Whyever did that pard *moharrie* o' our'n send sich a telegraft? It's some indefinite, seems ter me, Ted. 'A desert trail,' says she, 'an' a chanst ter right a great wrong.' Gadhook it all! It wouldn't hev cost more'n another two bits fer Stella to hev drapped in a few words as ter what ther bizness raley is."

"Perhaps, Bud, Stella didn't want that information to go through the telegraph-office. She's not the girl to shy at trifles—you know that."

"Well, anyways, hyer's you an' me crow-hoppin' er-long to'rds Campo an' ther bound'ry betwixt our native land an' Greaserdom. I allers feel like how I was off'n my range when I hunt inter the sand an' cactus down this-a-way. It ain't no kentry fer anythin' but greasers, an' Injuns, taranches an' side-winders, horned toads an' scorpions. It shore ain't, Ted."

The King of the Wild West laughed lightly. Bud had on one of his grumbling-streaks.

"I know what's the matter with you, Bud," said Ted.

"Throw it up ter me, then," came back Bud. "I been tryin' ter guess it out by myself, but it's too deep a cornundum."

"It's this way, pard," went on Ted; "you haven't had a fight or a foot-race for a week. Whenever you tumble into a quiet spell, you're quite apt to go around with a chip on your shoulder. You need a tonic, Bud; and it will have to come out of the bottle labeled 'Excitement—Shake well and take liberal doses.'"

That brought a guffaw from Bud.

"I reckon ye're right, Ted," said he. "Life's a pleasin' dish, purvidin' it's sarved hot, with a dash o' tabasco. What I need ter put me in proper trim is a bit of a set-to. I'm hopin' Stella has somethin' o' that kind up her sleeve—somethin' rale lively, with plenty o' give-an'-take in it. Thet's mainly why I'm fussin' erbout thet telegraft: It don't give us a line on anythin' wuth while. Now, ef I was ter——"

Bud came to an abrupt halt, for Ted had drawn rein, laid quick hand on his arm, and pointed through the gloom to a shadowy hilltop.

The two rough riders were on their way from Salton to Campo, in obedience to the request contained in Stella's telegram. For several days they had been inspecting the devastation caused by the Colorado River, which, leaving its ancient bed, was flooding an immense basin, and gradually forming a huge inland sea.

Stella's telegram drew them away from the novel spectacle, and they had now been two days in the saddle, riding toward the line that separated the Golden State from Lower California. Through those hot, sandy regions, night travel was best, so they camped during the heat of the day and did the most of their saddle-work between suns.

It was close to one o'clock in the morning when Ted Strong and Bud Morgan had the cross-fire of conversation that ushers in this chapter. They were picking their way along the Campo trail, sometimes threading arroyos where the gloom lay like a blanket, and sometimes crossing flat stretches where moonlight and starlight brought out the landscape with the distinctness of a silver-print.

They were almost across one of these stretches, and close upon a range of low hills, where a pass opened blackly before them, when Ted caught Bud's arm and pointed.

What Bud saw, off in the direction indicated by Ted's finger, was a blaze of yellow light on a hillcrest. It glowed brightly for an instant, then darkened, glowed again, and once more darkened.

"What ther blazes is thet?" growled Bud.

"Fire-signal," answered Ted briefly. Rising in his stirrups, he looked around. "Ah!" he exclaimed, and called Bud's attention to an answering glow to the north of the level over which they had just passed.

"Somethin' doin'," grunted Bud, with an undernote of satisfaction. "Fellers ter the south, there, signals ombrays ter the north. Thet's an Injun way o' passin' ther warnin' ter 'look out.'"

"Right you are, Bud," assented Ted. "We'll push through the arroyo to the hill where that south light flared out. Perhaps there is something going on in which we can take a hand."

"Seems too good ter be true!" exclaimed Bud.

Spurs rattled, quirts swished, and the rough riders rode at speed into the arroyo. Here a surprise awaited them, sprung with a suddenness that took them off their guard.

A sodden thud of hoofs smote on their ears, approaching along the gully from the southward. They did not hear the tattoo of galloping hoofs until the advancing horses were almost upon them.

They caught a glimpse of four shadowy figures rounding a sharp angle of the defile; and then, almost instantly, little spurts of flame shot up in the blackness, dying out to the accompaniment of sharp reports.

Bullets sang like bees about the ears of Ted and Bud. The rough riders, familiar as they were with all kinds of rough-and-ready warfare, were not long at a disadvantage. Out came their six-shooters; but, quick as they were, the quartet of approaching horsemen were upon them before a trigger could be pulled.

The four riders separated in pairs, one pair riding on either side of Ted and the other pair sailing past Bud on right and left.

The King of the Wild West ducked along his horse's neck just in time to avoid the sweeping butt of a rifle. "Crack!" went his forty-four, followed by a husky yell of *"Dios mio!"*

The man who had struck at Ted with his rifle dropped the weapon and reeled in the saddle. It seemed as though he was about to fall, but, as his horse galloped madly on, he gripped at his saddle-horn, and managed to keep on the animal's back.

Ted would have given pursuit, but Bud kept him back. Bud's mount was standing a dozen feet from Ted's; the saddle was empty, and Bud was having a fierce tussle in the sandy trail. Among the four horses that were almost lost in the darkness toward the north end of the arroyo was one that was riderless. Bud, it was plain, had flung himself on one of the men and borne him from his mount.

So, instead of giving pursuit, the King of the Wild West slipped his feet from the stirrups, jumped down, and ran to give Bud a hand.

Bud, however, was in no need of assistance. By the time Ted reached his side, Bud had his antagonist underneath, and was pinning him down, with a knee on his chest and two hands about his throat.

"Got one o' ther varmints, anyways," panted Bud. "Whyever did yer lam loose with a bullet at us, ye coyote?" snarled Bud, addressing his prisoner.

The man did not answer. In fact, he could not have answered if he had wanted to, on account of the strangling grip at his throat.

Ted struck a match. The prisoner was a tough-looking Mexican.

"Got a phiz on him thet orter send him ter jail on ginral principles," growled Bud. "Been pullin' off a hold-up game some'r's. I'll bet a poncho."

"That outfit was up to some lawless work, that's certain," returned Ted. "They were in such a hurry to make a get-away that they never stopped to help this rascal out of his trouble."

Stooping down, Ted pulled two revolvers from the prisoner's belt, and a yard away gathered up a rifle.

"He's ours, all right, now," announced Ted. "Let him up, Bud."

Bud sprang erect, the Mexican wriggling to his feet in a flash and starting to run.

"Steady as she goes!" yelped Bud, grabbing the Mexican by the collar of his shirt and poking him in the ribs with the muzzle of a revolver. "Let's pull this thing apart, Ted," he suggested, "an' see what makes it act so."

At that instant Ted's quick ear caught another beat of hoofs. These horses also were coming along the arroyo from the southward.

"Here comes another detachment, Bud," sang out Ted. "Take that man over to the side of the gully—I'll bring the horses."

"Step lively, ye measly varmint!" growled Bud, hunching his prisoner along with the revolver-point. "I ain't feelin' anyways kindly disposed to'rds ye, arter what ye done, an' this hyer trigger o' mine works on a hair. Sabe thet?"

At the side of the arroyo were a number of sand-dunes. Not knowing the force of the second party, the King of the Wild West thought well to make a stand—if one had to be made—behind the dunes.

Just as Bud crossed the top of one of the dunes, and just as Ted was riding in behind with the led-horse, the second party came close enough to detect the maneuver. Instantly the arroyo echoed with a clatter of rifle-shots.

"Whoop-la!" shouted Bud. "I reckon I'm gittin' what I was pinin' fer. We've shore stirred up some excitement, Ted, an' ther tonic is bein' spilled in them lib'ral doses ye was tellin' about. Lay still, consarn ye!" he added to the Mexican, whom he had thrown flat in the loose sand.

Ted made ready to use the rifle which he had picked up a minute before. The volley of bullets, launched from up the gully, had passed as harmlessly as had the fusillade dealt out by the first detachment. Shooting from the saddle of a galloping horse, in a gloomy place like the bottom of an arroyo at night, is a good deal of a guesswork proposition.

The King of the Wild West, still sitting in his saddle, could look out over the top of the dunes. From his elevated position he could count half a dozen dusky figures, all mounted.

The horsemen had drawn to a halt, after their initial volley, and were separating and melting away in the darkness.

What were they up to? was the question that ran through Ted's brain.

For five minutes—ten minutes—the two rough riders waited. Then there came a hoarse hail from the hill-crest behind them.

"Hello, thar, Taranch!" Ted, surprised at the way he and Bud were addressed, made no response. The hoarse voice went on: "We got yer foul this time, Taranch. Ye're plumb surrounded. Ye had yer nerve when ye piled inter Campo, like ye done, but it was a bad move fer you. I'm Handy, the sher'f. Sabe? Ef yer want ter save yer bacon, ye'll climb this hill, with all hands, an' give up yer hardware peaceable. Aire ye comin'? Git a hustle on, or we'll lam loose at ye with a round o' bullets!"

"Well, what d'ye think o' thet?" muttered the astounded Bud. "Hyer's you an' me, Ted, right-hand standbys o' law an' order, run down by a sher'f o' ther name o' Handy. Better speak up afore he gits too handy with his shooters."

"Hello, up there!" shouted the King of the Wild West; "there's no one here by the name of Taranch."

"Blazes ter blazes an' kerry one!" came hoarsely from up the hill. "Who aire ye, ef ye ain't thet greaser galoot what we've been a-chasin'? Speak out, an' speak quick!"

"Ted Strong is my name, and——"

"Ted Strong, o' Moon Valley?" The hoarse voice was aquiver with astonishment.

"That's it."

"King o' ther Wild West?"

"The same." Ted had to laugh a little at the elaborate precautions the sheriff was taking to make sure of those below. "My pard, Bud Morgan, is with me."

"Hooray fer the rough riders!" rang hoarsely from the crest of the hill.

The jubilant note was taken up from across the arroyo, and from the darkness above and below.

"We been a-lookin' fer you in Campo," went on the voice of Handy, as the cheering died away; "but I didn't allow we'd ever push ye inter a corner like this. Ye needn't come up, Ted Strong—I'll come down."

Then came a scramble on all sides of the rough riders as the sheriff and his posse raced for the sand-dunes.

CHAPTER III.

THE MEETING IN CAMPO.

"It does me proud, Ted Strong, ter meet up with ye an' yer pard Bud Morgan." With these words a thick-set, undersized man tumbled out of his saddle and made for the King of the Wild West with outstretched hand. "Blamed sorry we roughed things up like we done, but we was chasin' Pedro Gonzales, otherwise Taranch, one of the wust outlaws Mexico ever spewed onter United States soil. He an' three other greasers paid Campo a night visit, arter supplies. Taranch was disguised, but we got next ter him, an' laid a leetle trap. We blocked his way back inter the desert an' sent men along this trail ter the north ter lay fer him."

While the sheriff held to Ted's hand, the five who were with him gathered about the two rough riders and their prisoner. The prisoner was still lying flat in the sand, and Bud was sitting on him, to make sure he did not wriggle away. Because of the gloom, the sheriff and his posse could not size up the exact situation.

"We saw some signal-fires," said Ted. "Did you light them?"

"I lighted one, ter let a deperty o' mine know Taranch an' his men had struck inter the arroyo, headed north. Which way did you fellers come?"

"From the north."

"An' didn't ye see anythin' o' Taranch?"

"Four men shot at us, and three of them raced by. Of course, we didn't know anything about who they were. I winged one of them, and Bud grappled with another, got him out of his saddle, and made a prisoner of him."

"Nailed one o' them, hey?" cried Handy, in a jubilant tone. "By thunder, Ted Strong, ef ye got Taranch, it's a mighty fine piece o' work."

The sheriff stepped over to Bud, and one of the posse lighted a match.

"It ain't Taranch," went on Handy, in a disappointed tone, "but Taranch's best bower—the feller they call 'El Lobo,' or the Wolf. He's wanted, too, and'll stretch a rope fer things he's done on this side o' the border. But Taranch is the maverick we're arter. I don't reckon we kin waste much more time here, either, boys," the sheriff went on, addressing his posse, "ef we're goin' ter help thet thar deperty o' mine keep Taranch from gittin' acrost the line."

With one accord, the posse began taking to their saddles.

"Do you want Bud and me to ride with you, Handy?" Ted asked.

"It ain't hardly necessary, Ted," the sheriff answered, one foot in the stirrup and a hand on his saddle-horn; "we got men enough. Besides, yore gal pard is waitin' fer ye in Campo. Thet's how I come ter know ye was expected."

"How long has Stella been in Campo?"

"Got thar yistidy. Ef you an' Morgan'll take El Lobo inter town, an' hold him ag'inst ther time I git thar, I'll be obliged ter ye. S'arch him, an' keep anythin' ye find; I don't imagine it'll be much, kase these hyer greasers travels light. I'll see yer ter-morrer, an' tell yer more about this hike arter Taranch."

Handy swung into the stirrup and took his bridle-reins.

"Ye understand how it is, pard," he added; "business like this won't wait. Taranch is as slippery as an eel, an' I don't want him ter wriggle out o' the net we've fixed fer him."

"That's all right, Handy," answered Ted. "Where'll we find Stella?"

"At the Spread Eagle Hotel. Thar's only two hotels in Campo, an' they're so bad that when a feller stops at one he allers wishes he'd gone ter the other. So-long, fer now. I'm blamed glad ter hev yer with us, an' we'll palaver some in the mornin'."

With that, the sheriff and his posse trooped away from the sand-dunes and careered northward into the night.

"Huh!" grunted Bud sarcastically; "thet sher'f has mustered in a purty fair-sized army ter bag a corporal's guard o' greasers, seems ter me."

"That's all right, Bud," said Ted; "Handy is trying to play a safe game, and there is a good deal of country for him to cover."

"Mebby it's his way, but it ain't the rough riders', by a long shot. H'ist over, Wolf," Bud added to his prisoner; "git on yer face, so'st I kin git yer hands behind ye."

With a handkerchief taken from El Lobo's neck, Bud secured his hands at his back; then, taking the desperado up on the horse in front of him, Bud trailed off up the arroyo after Ted.

Campo was little more than a huddle of adobes. The town hung to a hillside like a blowout of white quartz, and was as quiet as a graveyard at that hour in the morning.

When Ted and Bud entered the one straggling street of the settlement, the echo of their horses' hoofs brought out a pack of mongrel dogs. The curs yelped and barked, and some one threw open a window, to ascertain the cause of the disturbance.

"Hello, there!" called a voice from the window. "That you, Handy? What luck?"

"It isn't Handy," answered Ted. "He's still in the hills, hunting Taranch. Where's the Spread Eagle Hotel, neighbor?"

"It's the big adobe on the right, two blocks farther on. Think Handy'll bag the greasers?"

"That's hard to tell. If it can be done, though, Handy will do it."

Thereupon Ted and Bud rode on with their prisoner, finally reaching the "big adobe" about which the townsman had told them. The structure was built around three sides of a court. Across this court the rough riders clattered, Ted drawing rein at a door and hammering on it with the butt of his six-shooter. The door opened in a few moments, and a man showed himself—a white man.

"Who's there?" inquired the man.

"A couple of travelers looking for a place to stay," Ted answered. "Are you the proprietor of the hotel?"

"I sure am," was the answer.

The proprietor had a lighted candle in his hand, and held it up for a good look into Ted's face. The hat, the clothes, the tan leggings, seemed to give him an idea.

"Say, are you Ted Strong, of the rough riders?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Ted.

"Bully! Your gal pard is here, and expectin' you. Who's that with you?"

"Another of my pards, and we have a prisoner."

"Prisoner?" came the startled response.

"Yes—El Lobo, one of Taranch's men. We met

Handy, and he asked us to bring El Lobo in and keep him till morning."

"That's the stuff!" exclaimed the man with the candle. "I reckon Handy's gettin' down to business now, with that bunch of terrors. My name's Parker," the man added, coming out into the court with his candle. "I'll show you a place where you can tie up El Lobo and keep him safe till Handy shows up."

Parker went to another door opening off the court, took a key out of his pocket, and unlocked it. Ted and Bud dismounted, and went in with their prisoner.

"This here's my storeroom," went on Parker, setting the candle down on a box. "There ain't no windows to the room, and once you get ropes on the greaser's hands and feet, and we lock the door, he'll be as secure as he would be in the jail."

"My pard and I will stay right here with him, Parker," said Ted, after a swift look about the place. "That will be safer, I think."

"But don't you want a bed to sleep in?"

"It lacks only a few hours till daylight, and I guess we can make shift to get along."

"All right," assented Parker. "After I take care of your horses, I'll bring your riding-gear in here. Want me to tell Miss Fosdick you've come? She'll be powerful glad to know it."

"Don't disturb her now—tell her in the morning. I don't think there's any particular rush about that."

"Correct."

Parker went out, closing the door after him. Now, for the first time, Ted and Bud had a chance to give El Lobo a good measuring.

He was fitted out in vaquero rig, and his wizened, ill-omened face was even more forbidding by candle-light than under the brief flare of a match.

El Lobo had not spoken a word since his capture. There were daggers in his little, shifty eyes, however, whenever they rested on Ted or Bud.

"He's a beauty, all right," remarked Bud, pushing El Lobo against the wall. "Thet mug o' his 'u'd take a prize in any rogues' gallery north o' ther Rio Grande. A rope 'u'd look well around his neck. The sher'f said ter s'arch him, an' right hyer's where I do the trick."

The first thing Bud found was a bag of smoking-tobacco; this was followed by a little packet of trimmed corn-husks, which is a Mexican's makeshift for rice-paper. Then, of course, there was a match-case.

"Ther señor is shore shy on pussonal property," said Bud, "an' it looks like we was goin' ter hev slim pickin's, but—— Jumpin' sand-hills! What hev I struck?"

Bud's hand pulled a wallet out of the breast of the prisoner's shirt. El Lobo writhed and ground his teeth, his brown, hideous face becoming fairly wolfish in expression. Throwing himself forward, bound as he was, he tried to sink his teeth in Bud's wrist.

Bud dropped the wallet, jerked away his arm and hurled the prisoner back against the wall.

"The ornery cur!" cried Bud. "There must be somethin' of importance in thet pocketbook or he wouldn't git so savage as all thet."

"We'll rope him," said Ted, picking a riata off a peg in one of the walls, "and if we have to, we'll muzzle him."

The prisoner was made to lie flat on the floor. While Ted was tying the rope about his ankles, Bud proceeded to examine the wallet.

"Reg'lar Rube ketch-all," mused Bud, "one o' the long kind, with a strap around ther middle. Looks like it had been through ther war. An' what's this hyer?" He took the wallet closer to the candle. "Say, Ted, there's two initials burned on ther flap. 'D. W.'"

"Probably those are the initials of the greaser's correct name," returned Ted.

At that moment the door opened and Stella sprang into the room. She was followed by a slender lad of ten, with a bright, boyish face and honest gray eyes.

"Ted!" cried Stella, springing toward the King of the Wild West with both hands outstretched, "and Bud, too! Say, I'm awfully glad to see you."

"Same here, little pard," smiled Ted. "We got to this place as soon as we could after receiving your telegram."

"Shore we did," grinned Bud, shifting the wallet to his left hand and reaching forward his right. "The sight o' ye, sis, is sartinly good fer sore eyes. But that telegraft o' your'n wasn't so blamed clear as I'd like ter——"

A wild, shrill cry suddenly echoed through the room. Bud, all at once, felt the wallet snatched from his hand. Whirling around, he saw the boy with the carroty hair and the gray eyes examining the wallet in the candle-light. The white had crept into the lad's brown face, and his hands were shaking.

"Sufferin' cats!" growled Bud. "Thet pocketbook seems ter hev a cur'ous effect on some people. Who's ther kid, Stella? An' what's ther matter with him, anyways?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE HOARD OF THE COCOPAHS.

Stella went over to the boy and laid one arm affectionately about his shoulders.

"What is it, Jimmie?" she asked.

"This—this leather used—to—to be dad's!" The boy's voice was a whisper.

Some of his excitement passed to Stella, at that.

"Are you sure of that, Jimmie?" she asked.

"It's a lead-pipe cinch; I've seen it too many times to have it get past my guard now. Why, there's dad's initials burned into the flap. 'D. W.'—David Walker." Jimmie brushed a hand across his forehead. "I guess you'll think it's a clear case o' me goin' daffy, but it's been two years since I piped of this leather and—and"—here the boy swallowed hard—"a whole lot has happened in those two years."

Ted and Bud were both mightily surprised to see this lad with Stella; and, quite naturally, both guessed that the boy had something to do with their chance to "right a great wrong."

Jimmie looked very different from what he did when we saw him last. He had a brand-new outfit of clothes, with which Stella had supplied him when they left Yuma. Clothes, of course, never make the man—nor the boy, either—yet there is something in "putting up a front." And just then Jimmie Walker put up a front that drew Ted and Bud strongly his way.

Stella introduced Jimmie to the rough riders. Laying the wallet on the box beside the candle, Jimmie grabbed Ted's hand as though it was a life-preserver.

"Accordin' to league rules," said he quaintly, "I'm right in the game. Ted Strong! King o' the Wild West! Say, cull, I thought, from what I been readin' about you,

that you was ten feet high an' built up like the Terrible Turk. How do you ever pull off all this game business they tell about?"

Ted laughed and patted Jimmie on the shoulder.

"You don't want to believe all you read, Jimmie, and only about half what you see," said Ted.

"All right, if you say so. But I've caught up with the live ones now, that's a cinch. I've been hunting you for six months, Ted Strong."

"And walking pretty much all the time, at that," put in Stella, with a quick rush of sympathy. "Jimmie came to Yuma looking for you, Ted; he didn't find you, but he did find me——"

"And she's the clear quill," chirped Jimmie. "She's one girl in a million, you take it from me. Fitted me out with these glad rags, that's what she did——"

"And the first thing Jimmie did, after getting into his new clothes," smiled Stella, "was to saw up about half a cord of wood at the Yuma 'Central.'"

"The clerk there gave me a hand-out," explained Jimmie; "I said I'd buck up the timber, and I did."

"Thet's the stuff, Jimmie!" approved Bud. "Allers make yer word as good as yer bond."

"But what about that wallet that belonged to Jimmie's father?" asked Ted. "There's a bit of a mystery here, seems to me."

"A good deal of that is wrapped up in the telegram I sent you," said Stella. "Jimmie has something to tell you, Ted, but, first, let us know where you got the wallet."

Ted explained that point.

"This is a queer coincidence," murmured Stella, gazing at the prisoner. "Do you want to hear what Jimmie has to say now, or wait till morning, Ted?"

"We might as well have the story now," returned the King of the Wild West.

"Shore," said Bud; "let's find out what sort of a deal we're up ag'inst."

They all seated themselves on boxes, ranged in a sort of circle, with El Lobo lying in the center. The dim light of the candle sent mysterious shadows scurrying about the room, lending a weird effect to what the boy had to say.

"You might begin with the letter," said Stella.

Jimmie dug up a folded paper from somewhere about his clothes. The paper was soiled and worn from much handling.

"The envelope that it come in got lost in the shuffle," explained Jimmie, "but it was postmarked at Ensenada, Mexico, more'n six months ago."

"Ensenada," interjected Ted, taking the tattered letter and opening it out, "is some sixty miles down the coast, on the Gulf of California." Then he began to read:

"My Dear Son:—I am writing you this from the heart of the Cocopah Desert. This desert has proved the death of many a gold-hunter, and it is now about to prove mine. I do not know that this letter will ever reach you, for I am trusting it to a carrier-pigeon which my friend Carlos Enriques, of Ensenada, Mexico, told me to bring along into the desert, so that I might communicate with him if I found myself in difficulties. But Carlos Enriques cannot help me now—no man can help me. I have only a few hours to live, at the most. Before the carrier-pigeon wings its way to Ensenada—and I have my doubts of its reaching there through this awful heat—I shall no longer be among the living.

"However, my dear boy, I have found wealth in these awful wilds, and it is my prayer that you may receive this letter, get true men to help you, and come after the fortune which will be yours. You will have great difficulty, but you were always brave and resourceful, and I think you will succeed.

"In the heart of the Cocopah Desert, one mile south of the Laguna Salado—a salt lake with tides like the ocean—rises the Mushroom Rock. Eastward of Mushroom Rock I uncovered a golden 'pocket' which yielded me six large buckskin bags of nuggets. While I was at work unearthing the nuggets, a Cocopah Indian rode past on his way to gather pine nuts in the western mountains. This Indian declared that the gold I was digging was the hoard of the Cocopahs, and, by the superstitious tribe, considered the property of the spirit, Wau Kean.

"But the gold did not belong to the Cocopahs—it belonged to *me*. I had hunted through that region of death and I had found it fairly. The Indian ordered me to go and leave my find, but I would not; we fought, and I beat him off.

"After that, I knew I should have trouble. Finishing my work as quickly as I could, I cached the six buckskin bags at the foot of Mushroom Rock—being unable to carry them away, as my pack mules had died of exhaustion and thirst. I intended returning on foot to Ensenada—a terrible trip, but I felt that I must make it safely. For at last, my son, you and I were to be rich—the wolf would never more be at our door.

"Yet it was a vain hope. Before I could leave the place where I had found my wealth, another wolf was upon me, a human wolf, and with him came the leader of a desperate gang, one Taranch, a Mexican, and a full score of vengeful Cocopah Indians.

"I had heard of the superstitious Cocopahs, and had armed myself with some ghostly claptrap in the hope of frightening them. I did frighten them, but I could not frighten the Mexicans who were with them. I am now entirely surrounded by the gang, and have but one cartridge left in my rifle. The end must come shortly, and I am writing this to send by carrier-pigeon to Carlos Enriques, by him to be mailed to you. It is night, my last night on earth. For Taranch and the Wolf will slay me, in order that they themselves may possess the hoard of the Cocopahs.

"Find some reliable men to help you, Jimmie, and promise them some of the gold for their aid. But be sure that they are honest men, and brave. Then come to Campo, in California; thence proceed south to Tajo, thirty miles below the Mexican line. From Tajo, traverse the Cañon de las Palmas, and you will be at the edge of the desert. See that you bring a large supply of water.

"You will find my hut at the 'pocket,' eastward of Mushroom Rock. A flat stone in the floor of the hut conceals a small cache, in which you will find the ghostly claptrap, should you or your party need to personate the god, Wau Kean, and awe the Indians. But I hope you will not be beset, that you will cross the desert from Tajo and return in safety, and that you will secure your gold and use it righteously.

"You were always a good boy, Jimmie. See that you remain so. That is my last wish.

"The Mexicans and Indians are creeping upon me through the night. I can see their forms coming closer and closer. I have not much time left, so I will bring this letter to a close, and——"

There was no more. David Walker had not even time left to sign his name.

It was a thrilling story, that contained in the scrawling words of the gold-hunter's last letter. Strangest of all, Ted and Bud had captured one of the very men who had wrought the gold-hunter's undoing. El Lobo's possession of David Walker's wallet was proof of that. He was the "Wolf" mentioned in the letter; and Taranch, who was being chased at that moment by Handy and his posse, was leader of the party that had slain Walker.

"All-fired queer how things turn out sometimes," muttered Bud, his heavy voice breaking the weird silence.

"Where were you, Jimmie, when you received this letter?" Ted asked in a kindly tone.

"At our old stampin'-ground in Denver," replied Jimmie. "Dad and I hung out there mostly when we wasn't huntin' gold in the mountains and deserts. I had an uncle living in New York, and dad sent me there for a spell. But, on the level, I like the West better'n the East.

"As soon's I got that letter in my mitt, I had a think that Ted Strong and the rough riders were the boys to help me. There wasn't any one else I wanted to trust, see? But I knew the King o' the Wild West could be banked on at every stage o' the game. Then I set out to hunt you up."

Jimmie paused a minute and grinned humorously.

"Gee, but you're a hard feller to locate, Ted!" he went on. "I'll bet I traveled a million miles, more 'r less. Wherever I happened to get a steer as to your location, then it was hike, and hike again. I wrote to Moon Valley, but no one there could give me much of a line on you. A while ago I run onto a lad who'd worked for you. He showed me how to give your Moon Valley yell. 'Jest keep travelin', son,' this lad told me, 'an' let out that yell about every ten feet. Ef any o' the rough riders hears it, they'll come a runnin'.' Say, you ought to've seen Pard Stella climb out o' that hammock when I whooped out that yell at the gate of Abe Ruff's, in Yuma."

Jimmie laughed, and "Pard Stella" smiled brightly.

"Have you ever tried, Jimmie," asked Ted, "to get into communication with Carlos Enriques, of Ensenada?"

"Sure thing. But Carlos Enriques is dead. He was a great lad for pigeons—'homers', you know—and about all he left his heirs was a pigeon-coop. At least that's what the Ensenada postmaster wrote me. But say, Ted," Jimmie suddenly inquired, "are you going to lend a hand and help me get this hoard of the Cocopahs?"

Ted smiled, and gave his girl pard a fond look.

"Stella has begun the fight for the hoard," he answered, "so I think Bud and I will follow along on this desert trail, do what we can for you, Jimmie, and so help to right a great wrong."

"I told you he would, Jimmie," cried Stella.

"You'll get a rake-off——" began Jimmie, but Ted raised his hand.

"All the rake-off we want is the knowledge that we're helping you—and pleasing our girl pard," said Ted.

"With a little excitement throwed in fer good measure," guffawed Bud.

"We start for Tajo to-morrow forenoon," finished Ted, "and when there, we'll outfit for the desert. Now go to bed, you two, and get ready for several days of work and peril."

Jimmie's lip trembled a bit as he thanked Ted and Bud; then he and Stella went away together.

Parker, the proprietor of the hotel, brought the saddle-trappings, and the rough riders stretched out on the floor, one on either side of the prisoner. Their saddle-blankets were under them, and they had their saddles for pillows.

It was just dawn when their next visitor entered the storeroom. There was a blood-stained handkerchief bound around his head, and a piece of reddened cloth was wrapped about his right knee. Parker helped him in.

Both Ted and Bud started up at the opening and closing of the door.

"Handy!" the King of the Wild West exclaimed.

"Aye, Ted Strong," was the husky response, "Handy it is, and a badly broken-up Handy, too, as ye might jedge from appearances."

The sheriff was lowered down on a box.

"How about Taranch?" queried Ted.

"Made his git-away," growled Handy, "and is acrost ther border an' headed fer ther Cocopah Desert, by now. Two o' my men was bowled over, an' as fer me—well, ye kin see the fix I'm in. Thet Taranch is the fiend himself; he can't be ketched."

CHAPTER V.

A PERILOUS UNDERTAKING.

Ted and Bud had slept possibly three hours, but there was no more sleep for them that night. The news brought by the wounded sheriff was too exciting, and had too deep a bearing on the work the rough riders were about to undertake.

"How did it happen?" asked Ted, as he and Bud got up, shook themselves, and sat down on a couple of boxes.

"You tell!" growled the sheriff. "We thort we hed Taranch an' ther two with him cornered. I j'ined up with my deperty an' we drove in on the greasers. Thar was gun-play, over went two o' my men, an' I got creased in the forehead an' stopped a bullet with my leg, at the same time. When we got ter whar we thort ther greasers was, they was gone. We didn't see hide ner ha'r o' them arter thet. I tell ye, thet Taranch is in league with the Old Nick. Thet's what. Once back in ther desert, thar ain't men enough in Upper er Lower California ter put ther kibosh on him."

"Why is he so safe when he is in the Desert of Cocopah?" queried Ted.

"Kase why? I'll tell ye. Them Cocopah Injuns stand at his back. Taranch uses the poor varmints fer tools—they think he's big medicine, an' help 'im rob an' kill jest as he tells 'em. The Injuns hev got holes whar they kin hide, an' you kin bet yer spurs thar ain't a white man livin' as kin find the hole whar they'll tuck Taranch away if a bunch o' whites ever had the nerve ter go arter him. But the Injuns ain't the only safeguard this Taranch has—not by a row o' 'dobies."

"How else is he protected?"

"Why, by ther desert itself. Man, ain't ye never heerd o' the perils o' the Cocopah Desert? No water, hot as sin, cactus even can't grow thar, an' even horned toads an' side-winders give it a wide berth. It's a gray level o' death, that's what it is, an' it's got ter be crossed ef a party ever wants ter come at Taranch. Then, thar's ther balsas."

"Balsas?"

"Shore; ther heathen weppins used by the Cocopahs, an' by Taranch, when he's among 'em." Handy shiv-

ered. "I kin face guns, but when I sees two undersized cannon-balls comin' at me, with a dancin' rawhide rope between, I knows ter a sartainty thet it's stranglin' fer mine. No, siree! Oxcuse Handy when ther balsas aire flyin'."

"Bosh!" grunted Bud. "If I was in front o' them cannon-balls ye speak of, blamed if I wouldn't ketch 'em an' toss 'em back."

"Ye don't know what ye're a-sayin', Morgan," returned the sheriff. "It's up ter the Greaser Rurales, now, ter git Taranch by ther heels. The most I kin do is ter keep him off'n United States soil. An' ye kin bet I don't bite off any more'n thet—not ef I know myself."

It was plain that the sheriff had lost his nerve, so far as capturing Taranch was concerned. Bud looked at Ted as though slightly amused.

"Any Rurales in Tajo?" went on Ted.

"A passel of 'em. But they ain't pinin' fer ther job o' corrallin' Taranch any more'n what I be. You kin bet them Rurales'll leave Taranch alone."

"What has Taranch done?"

"What hasn't he done? He's killed, an' robbed, an' burned all around the aidge o' ther desert. Ef any cussedness has happened around ole Cocopah, charge it up ter Taranch an' ye won't be far wide o' yer trail."

"Has El Lobo, here," and Ted pointed to the roped prisoner, "done any lawlessness on American soil for which he can be brought to book?"

"Any amount o' it!"

"Got proof against him?"

"Proof enough to make him stretch a rope."

"All right, then."

Ted was thinking of the killing of David Walker. That happened, of course, on Mexican soil, and could not be revenged by United States law. But if there was cause for action against him in the United States courts, the prisoner could be left to them.

"You an' Morgan, Ted," proceeded Handy, "hev got the only credit thet comes out o' last night's bizness. Next ter Taranch, El Lobo was the feller we're all arter. You murderin' whelp!" gritted Handy to the prisoner, kicking at him with the toe of his boot. "You'll git yore what-for, an' no mistake."

"Bud and I," went on Ted, "are going to leave El Lobo in your charge, Handy. Put him through, and don't take any chances on his giving you the slip."

"Ye kin gamble I won't, Ted Strong," declared the sheriff. "We'll take him north, under a strong guard, afore ther sun is noon high. It won't do ter keep him in Campo—it's too near the border, while Taranch is loose on t'other side the line. Mebby you an' Morgan'll ride north with us?"

"We have other business, Handy," answered Ted. "But for that, we'd be glad to accompany you."

"Bizness?" repeated Handy, wincing from the pain of his wounds. "'Course I don't mean ter pry, but——"

"I don't mind telling you what part of the business is," continued Ted, calmly confident. "We're going to Tajo, and out into Cocopah Desert by way of the Cañon de las Palmas."

"Goin' inter the desert, hey? Then I'll say good-by ter ye, Ted Strong. Ef ye go inter ther desert, ye'll never come back. Why, thet stretch o' kentry is kivered with bleachin' bones—*white men's bones*. Mebby them white men died from lack o' water, an' mebby they was killed by Taranch an' his Cocopahs. *Quien sabe?* Anyways, they was killed; an', fer years now, no white man has ever gone inter the Cocopah Desert an' come back. A lot o' gold-hunters has tried it. They've gone away lookin' fer a fabulous pocket o' gold called the hoard o' ther Cocopahs; but, as I jest told ye, they've never come back. An' you won't come back, nuther—if ye go. But I'm hopin' ye'll listen ter reason, an' stay away."

"We're going," averred Ted.

"Spread yore blankets an' go ter sleep on *thet!*" seconded Bud.

"I hates ter see ye cut off in yer youth an' bloom," returned the sheriff gruesomely. "Ye'll never come back, thet's a cinch."

"We're coming back," repeated Ted, slowly and deliberately, "and when we do come back, Handy, *we'll bring Taranch.*"

In spite of his wounded leg, Handy jumped from the box on which he was sitting. El Lobo, from his place on the floor, turned a pair of glittering, malevolent eyes on the King of the Wild West.

"Yi-yipee!" yelled Bud jubilantly.

"Ye're—ye're plumb locoed," faltered the staggered sheriff, looking from Ted to Bud as he sank back on the box. "What makes yer think yer'll bring in Taranch?"

"I have a 'hunch' to that effect," smiled Ted.

For the King of the Wild West knew that, wherever the hoard of the Cocopahs was to be found, somewhere in the vicinity this Taranch would be prowling. To go into the desert and bring away the hoard meant a clash with Taranch. There was no doubt in Ted's mind about that.

In order to enlighten the sheriff further Ted would have had to tell him some of Jimmie's story, which was not advisable.

"Where'd thet come from?" inquired the sheriff, as his eye fell on the wallet which was lying on the box where Jimmie had left it.

"We found that in the prisoner's pocket," answered Ted, giving Bud a look which told him plainly to keep still while Ted did the talking.

"Anything in it?" went on the sheriff.

"Three Mexican dollars, that's all."

"An' he didn't hev nothin' else on him?"

"Nothing but his guns. They're over there in the corner."

The sheriff got up lamely from the box.

"My deperty'll be hyer inside o' an hour an' take the Wolf off'n yore hands, Ted," said he. "Bound ter go huntin' death in ther Cocopah kentry, aire ye? Nothin' I kin say won't change yer mind?"

"No."

"Well, ye're shore makin' a mistake, an' ye won't find it out until it's too late."

The sheriff went out, shaking his head forebodingly.

It was about 10 o'clock when Ted, Bud, Stella, and Jimmie mounted their horses and pointed for Tajo. They had a long, hot ride before them, but it was mostly through a rough country where the sides of defiles and the slopes of hills shaded the trail.

The rough country, while affording shade and tempering the heat, likewise screened the movements of two copper-colored forms that hung like specters on the flanks of Ted's party. These shadowers were Cocopah bucks. They were naked to the waist, but had their nether limbs clothed in buckskin, while their feet were bare. Each buck carried the deadly balsa-rope over his shoulder, the

leaden balls with which the rope was tipped swinging as he rode.

There was not a move made by the rough riders that the eagle-eyed Cocopahs failed to see.

CHAPTER VI.

BUD AND THE BALSAS.

A little more than thirty miles separated Cannon from Dolo. There were springs along the trail so that the rough riders did not have to carry water; and midway between the two settlements was a Mexican hacienda where they could secure food.

In places the trail threaded defiles so narrow the riders had to proceed in single file, Ted taking the lead, Stella following, then Jimmie, and finally Bud, bringing up the rear. While wending their way through one of these clefts in the hills Bud fancied he heard the rattling fall of a mis-placed stone from somewhere behind.

He turned swiftly in his saddle for a backward look, but he could see nothing. The gash twisted serpentine through the hills and a sharp bend cut off anything like an extensive view to the rear.

"I say, there, Ted!" Bud called, just loud enough for his voice to reach Ted's ear.

"Well?" flung back Ted, facing about and making as though he would pull to a halt.

"Don't stop, any o' ye," counseled Bud; "keep shackin' along just as though I wa-n't sayin' a word. Ye can hear me all right, Ted, can't ye? I don't want ter holler out too loud."

"I can hear," said Ted, cocking his ear sideways. "What's on your mind, Bud?"

"I'm a Piegan if I don't opine some o' them greaser aps are follerin' us up."

"What gives you that idea?"

"Heerd a rock fall, some'r's in the rear. Bein' at ther tail-end o' the percession, I could hear a thing like thet when it 'u'd git past the rest o' ye. How erbout investigatin'?"

"How do you intend to investigate?"

"Well, it sorter struck me I might slip out o' ther saddle an' dodge behind a boulder. The rest o' ye could keep on, an' my horse 'u'd foller. Ketch my drift? If there's any greasers behind listenin' ter the hoof-falls of our mounts, they wouldn't miss the trampin' of any o' the hosses, an' so wouldn't have no cause ter suspect thet I was on foot, investigatin'. See what I mean?"

"Good idea, Bud. Where'll we wait for you?"

"How fur's ther next water?"

"About a mile ahead, if I have my bearings right."

"Wait fer me there." Bud kicked his feet free and slid to the ground.

"Say, cull," spoke up Jimmie, looking around at Bud, "what's the matter o' me trottin' this heat with you?"

"It ain't no bizness fer kids, Jimmie," answered Bud, ducking behind a boulder that jutted out into the defile.

"Well, I'm no two-spot, if it comes to that," growled Jimmie. "I'm pretty big for my size, I am, and Handy gave me one of the Wolf's guns."

The long-barreled Colt was hanging from Jimmie's hip like a small cannon. He slapped it with his hand as he spoke.

"You won't find me a figurehead, Bud, if you'll let me stay with you."

Jimmie had been slowly receding from Bud all the while he was talking. Bud, crouching behind the boulder, put a finger to his lips, shook his head, and motioned for Jimmie to keep right on. A minute or two later, a turn in the defile shut Ted, Stella, Jimmie, and the riderless horse in the rear from Bud's eyes.

Bud continued to crouch and to wait, straining his ears for a sound of hoofs from the north. He hung to his post for five minutes, perhaps, although it seemed more like five hours to him, and not a sound reached him from the rear.

Thinking he had been fooled, and that there were really no Mexicans following, Bud climbed to the top of the boulder for a last look down the narrow gulch. As he raised himself erect on the flat upper surface of the big rock, his limbs grew tense with astonishment and an involuntary yell escaped him.

Two mounted Indians were within twenty feet of him. The Indians' horses were scrawny-looking brutes, and had no saddles on their backs, and neither bridle nor hackamore on their heads. But it was the Indians themselves, and not their mounts, that claimed the heft of Bud's attention, just then.

The bucks were a villainous-looking pair and seemed ripe for any kind of deviltry. Yet, for a brief space, they appeared as startled at seeing Bud as he was at seeing them. For a few dramatic seconds, Bud stared down from the boulder and the Indians stared up from the trail, neither the rough rider nor the Cocopahs making a move.

The first thought that cut through Bud's bewilderment had to do with the coming of the two horses—an approach so silent as to baffle Bud's keen ears. The horses' hoofs, he saw, were muffled to the fetlocks in pieces of blanket.

This incidental detail rushed through the rough rider's brain like a flash. At about the same instant, one of Bud's hands leaped for his belt and the butt of a forty-four.

Bud was quick, but one of the Cocopahs was quicker. The buck's copper-colored body writhed like lightning on his cayuse's bare back. Another moment and Bud saw two black balls darting toward him through the air. A sagging length of rawhide cord connected the balls, and, as the missiles drew nearer their mark, they seemed to jump apart as though endued with life, snapping the rawhide taut between them.

What the sheriff had said about the balsas rushed through Bud's brain. Something like fascination took hold of Bud, keeping him motionless with his fingers on the hand-grip of his six-shooter. He stared at the weird weapon, wondering vaguely what it would do when it struck him.

The balsas were not long in the air. Three seconds, maybe, measured their flight from the Cocopah's deft hand to the target on the boulder; yet those three seconds gave Bud ample time to experience a variety of emotions.

When he managed to fight clear of the strange fascination inspired by the balsas, it was too late to use his revolver. Bud was always "quick on the draw," and he got the weapon from his belt with a magic swiftness that deceived the eye. Before he could press the trigger, however, the rawhide rope struck him midway of its

length. Thus halted in their flight, the balls at the rope's ends began circling Bud's throat in opposite directions, winding the rawhide around and around with strangling pressure.

While the balls were looping murderously through the air, Bud was pitching from the boulder, overborne by the terrific impact of the rope.

All this happened, of course, much quicker than it takes to tell it; and about the first thing Bud realized, after seeing the two balls sailing toward him through the air, was that he was on his back in the trail, unable to catch his breath and slowly choking.

The Cocopah who had launched the balsas jumped from his horse in grim silence, ran toward Bud noiselessly, knelt down on one knee and lifted a knife over his head.

But there was still plenty of fight left in the rough rider. True, he could not breathe, but his lungs had enough air in them to tide him over a brief, desperate struggle.

Doubling his knees, he planted his heavy boots crushingly against the Cocopah's breast. The knife flew a dozen feet out of the Indian's hand; the Indian's breath was "chugged" out of him and he turned a back-somersault and doubled up in the trail like a jack-knife.

If Bud had had only one Cocopah to deal with all might have been well. But, by that time, the second Indian was on the ground and springing forward to take a hand. He had his balsas, too, but used them differently.

With his hand closed around one of the balls, the Cocopah swung the other ball at the end of the rope.

Biff! The heavy sphere landed on Bud's head as he attempted to rise, stunned him and laid him helplessly on his back again. The blow, coupled with lack of breath, placed the rough rider completely at the second Cocopah's mercy.

Jerking a knife from his belt, the Indian started to do the work his mate had attempted. In Bud's spent condition, he sensed matters hazily, like one in a dream.

The Indian leaped to his side like a puma, crouched, the knife flashed in air; then—a revolver cracked. The walls of the defile took up the wild echoes, and Bud saw the knife, and the hand that held it, fall supinely. The Cocopah seemed to melt away in a dusky fog.

When Bud opened his eyes, a moment later, Jimmie Walker was kneeling at his side, disentangling the rawhide rope. The boy grinned as Bud's opening eyes rested on his face.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ARROW'S MESSAGE.

"Whar's them Injuns?" whooped Bud the instant his throat was free of the rawhide strand.

"I guess they thought they'd move on and send their explanations by mail," laughed Jimmie. "Say, Bud, why didn't you do what you said?"

"Do what?" grunted Bud savagely, sitting up in the sand.

"Why, didn't you tell Handy that if any of those undersized cannon-balls flew your way you'd grab 'em in out of the air and fire 'em back? That's what Handy told me you said, anyhow."

"You say moo an' chase yerself," snorted Bud, staggering to his feet.

Yes, it was just as Jimmie had said. The two Cocopahs had mounted their horses and pulled out, but they had left behind them one of the balsas and a knife.

Jimmie, having taken the balsas-rope from Bud's throat, was curiously examining the queer contrivance. Bud picked up the knife, stared at the crude piece of steel for a second, then flung it angrily away.

"Well," he observed, "I knowed we was follered. How did you git hyer, kid?" he added, as the mystery of the boy's appearance happened to strike him.

"You said I couldn't come."

"I shore did, buttinsky."

"Well, I did come, all the samee. Dropped out of my saddle while Ted and Stella were chinning, and hot-footed it back down the gulch. And if I hadn't come, you'd have got a piece of cold steel between the ribs."

"Ye did well, kid," said Bud, recovering a little from his chagrin. "I wasn't lookin' fer ther whelps ter come at me with chain shot, like what ye're holdin' in yer hands; but if I ever come up with thet brace o' reds ag'in, they'll hev ter put a stamp on their balsas an' send 'em by mail if they expect 'em ter reach me. S'pose we hike fer the next water, an' meet up with Ted an' Stell?"

Bud and Jimmie had not covered a quarter of a mile of their southward tramp before they met Ted and Stella riding back, leading the extra horses.

"Where did you go, Jimmie?" asked Stella, a look of relief crossing her face at sight of the boy.

Jimmie explained, Bud dropped in a word or two, and when the little cavalcade resumed its journey the King of the Wild West was particularly thoughtful.

Were those two Cocopah Indians, with whom Bud had had his clash, part of the band that owned the leadership of the Mexican, Taranch? It seemed certain that they must be. Why, then, were they following the rough riders?

Ted was almost brought to the conviction that Taranch suspected the rough riders were on his trail. If this were really the case, then the two Cocopahs were probably spying upon Ted and his friends in order to make sure of their designs and carry the news to the Mexican outlaw.

The remainder of that day's journey was finished without incident worthy of record.

Tajo, being twenty miles south of the line, was Mexican through and through. There was not an American resident in the place.

There was no hotel, and the best of the adobe houses were but little better than *jacals*. The head man of the village, however, came forward and hospitably invited the rough riders to share his home for the night.

There were two rooms in the Mexican's house, and his family numbered fifteen. The entire fifteen herded in one room in order to insure Stella the privacy of the other. As for Ted, Bud, and Jimmie, they made shift with three hammocks stretched between cottonwoods at the back of the house.

The evening meal, according to Jimmie, had been a "hot" one. Inasmuch as it had consisted principally of red peppers, dished up in various ways, the rough riders agreed heartily with Jimmie.

After the three had crawled into their hammocks, their Mexican host came out under the cottonwood-trees and smoked corn-husk cigarettes and told them stories about Taranch until a late hour.

Taranch, it appeared, had been a vaquero, or Mexican

cowboy, earlier in his career. His first step in crime was taken by rustling cattle. From cattle-rusher to petty [illegible] was the next step, and from thieving in a small way to wholesale operations in outlawry was the third and last step.

The fact that Taranch had once been a cattle-thief drew the rough riders more earnestly to the task of capturing him. Inasmuch as Ted and his friends had a legitimate cattle-business of their own, they were naturally at sword's points with rustlers.

"I'm sorry we didn't outfit in Cazpo," Ted remarked, after their host had left. "This town isn't much of a place for supplies."

Bud had a lump on the side of his head as big as a goose-egg. He was nursing it with a greaser make-shift for arnica, which had been given him by their host, and mentally wishing that fate would some day bring him within shooting-distance of the Cocopah who had struck him with the balsa.

"Plenty o' mules hyer, Ted," said Bud, wriggling around in his hammock.

"We can pick up all the burros we need, Bud, but I was thinking about provisions. Not much of a variety at the little *tienda*, I'll bet, and what they have won't be any too fresh."

"We'll manage. It isn't no pleasure-excursion, anyways. Reckon I can't tell yer how far it is this time. I've already been knocked on the head by one Cocopah an' half-strangled by another—an' if it hadn't been fer the kid I'd hev shore got bumped. Oh, no, this ain't no pleasure-excursion."

"You wanted excitement, Bud," laughed Ted.

"I'm gittin' livin' about enough of that now, pard, an' I ain't complainin' none o' the excitement I have in my mouth. I'm plenty satisfied with things as they is; fact I'll tell ye right now I'd cross that desert fer'ard, back and an' sideways jest ter get a back at the hombre that used that balsa. First time an' second I never got forewarned an' then by a bunch o' reds with a string an' two bad cart'ridges. Scandalous!"

Jimmie had gone fast to sleep while the Mexican was talking about Taranch. If he hadn't gone to sleep it is a safe to conclude that he'd have had an oar in the conversation.

"The more I hear about Taranch," said Ted, "the bigger this proposition of ours looms to us."

Bud snorted. "It don't take much ter git a passel o' greasers on the run," he averred. "They're all plumb scart o' Taranch—ever Handy."

"We'll get the rascal, of course," declared Ted. "But it isn't going to be any walk-away for us. I'd give something handsome if Lon, Kit, and Carl were along."

"That leaves jest so much more entertainment fer be divided up among the rest o' us. I wonder if I hev ever idee fer bagg'n' Taranch while helpin' Jimmie? Ye think the heard o' th——"

"Hist!" called Ted warningly. "Keep that to yourself, Bud."

"Well, ye think what we're goin' ter try an' help Jimmie git is somethin' that Taranch'll try ter hang onto. Is thet it?"

"Yes."

"But s'posin' Taranch don't know what we're goin' after? If he don't know, mebby he won't try ter stop us; an' if he don't try ter stop us, how we goin' ter git near enough ter him ter put on the kibosh?"

"The fact that those two Cocopahs were following us proves that Taranch is suspicious. He must have set them on to——"

Ted was interrupted at that point. There was a swishing sound, and some object darted through the air and brought up with a thud against the trunk of one of the trees.

Beyond the shadow of the cottonwoods all was bright moonlight. The object, whatever it was, had a whitish color; it leaped from somewhere out of the moonlight, flashed across Ted's hammock within six inches of his face, and could now be seen against the tree-trunk.

"Jumpin' sand-hills!" cried Bud, sitting up. "What was thet onnery thing, Ted?"

"Give it up, Bud," Ted answered. "But I'll soon find out," he added, getting clear of the hammock.

"While ye're lookin' in one direction," growled Bud, "I'll look in another. The thing come from around ther corner o' the 'dobe."

Bud jumped to the ground and ran for the side of the house. In the bright moonlight he could see that there was no one in that direction. He had an idea, however, that he heard quick, muffled footsteps at the front of the adobe. So he hastened toward the road, only to find fresh disappointment.

"Might er been a bat, or an owl," Bud was thinking.

Then, while he stood in front of the house peering about him, he heard a sound of galloping receding down the road.

"Some skulkin' human was mixed up in thet, shore," he muttered. "I wonder if he got away on his own cayuse or took one o' our'n?"

In order to satisfy himself on this point, Bud hurried to the corral, a few rods beyond the house. A brief investigation showed him that all the horses were in the enclosure. Not a little puzzled, Bud returned to the cottonwoods.

Ted was sitting on the side of his hammock, looking at some object in the semigloom.

"What ye got, pard?" Bud asked.

"A long, wicked-looking okatea arrow, armed with a steel tip," Ted answered. "If it had been aimed a few inches lower it would have gone clear through me."

"An arrer, eh?" said Bud. "It looked kinder white, ter me, when it come plungin' in under the trees. Think some 'un was tryin' ter do fer us?"

"No. The arrow carried a message."

"A message?" echoed the perplexed Bud.

"Yes. The message is written on a piece of paper that was tied to the shaft. There's no longer any doubt about our having a clash with Taranch when we get into the desert."

"How do ye figger thet out, Ted?"

"Listen." Ted picked up a scrap of paper that lay beside him in the hammock, struck a match, and read as follows:

"'For Ted Strong and his gringoes: Come into the Cocopah Desert at your peril. I am there. Do you wish your bones to whiten on the sands? If not, leave Tajo at once and return to your own country. Cross the desert's rim, and I strike.

"'EL CAPITAN TARANCH.'"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TERRIBLE DESERT OF COCOPAH.

From the lower entrance to the Cañon de las Palmas, run a line one hundred miles southeast until it touches the gulf coast. Between that line and the gulf will lie a territory about one hundred miles square, as little known as the interior of Africa.

This arid region, given over to death and desolation, embraces the terrible Desert of Cocopah. It is an innocent-looking spot on the map, but on the surface of what it represents lie bleaching the bones of many men, both white and red.

You will note that it is not marked with the zigzag lines which generally denote watercourses, nor is it marked with the shaded lines representing mountains. Why? Simply because as yet there has been found no corps of engineers with sufficient hardihood to attempt its survey. There are maps of the region, but they are seared on the brains of Cocopah and Mexican outlaws, who took to the desert for safety and learned some of its ways.

Standing on this figurative line you have drawn and looking eastward, you may see the outlines of a range of low mountains, distant, with water, forty, possibly sixty miles. Without water eternity intervenes between you and that range of hills darkly purple through the shimmering heat. That stretch of forty to sixty miles is the worst part of the Cocopah Desert, and it was the part that Ted Strong and his friends had to cross in their search for the hoard of the Cocopahs.

A wide stretch of arid, sterile, sandy plain, lying far below the level of the sea, and absolutely devoid of vegetation and life in any form. It is even too hot and dry for the lizard, which loves heat like a salamander.

Forty or sixty miles is not a great distance, you say, and ought to be covered in one day, or two days at the most. Other brave men have thought the same, and have tried the passage. Their bones, scattered about in the sand, afford proof of their error. Every year for half a century the desert has claimed its victims, singly and in groups. Every year since the Argonauts drifted south from the gold-fields of Upper California men have started for the Cocopah Mountains and never returned.

Once having reached the mountains the traveler's perils do not cease. There are but two or three places in all the range on the west side where drinkable water may be found. The seminaked humans, whom the law has driven into the stifling, sandy waste, know these few meager springs and keep them for their own.

What lures men to that locality and tempts them to cross the burning sands? Gold; the storied treasure known as the hoard of the Cocopahs. This hoard the superstitious red men had dedicated to their god, Wau Kean. For was it not Wau Kean who set his Sun Demon to guarding the hoard?

All this information regarding the desert the King of the Wild West had gathered from various sources. Those who know anything about Ted Strong will understand that nature's perils could not daunt him, any more than could that warning from "El Capitan Taranch," received on the arrow's haft.

In Tajo Ted secured four pack mules. He was fortunate, also, in securing some special equipment manufactured for a prospector who had planned to penetrate the desert and who had, at the last moment, "backed down."

This equipment consisted of four water-receptacles, each holding a hundred quarts and especially constructed to fit the back of a mule or burro. Apart from these four hundred quarts of water there was a store of prepared food, and a quantity of oats for the animals.

The King of the Wild West was going to make a dash for Mushroom Rock. He did not intend to be long on the way, either going or coming. He would get the hoard out of its cache quickly, and he would capture Taranch with equal celerity.

For this work there were only Ted, Bud, Stella, and Jimmie. With this slender force, Ted was to attempt a task which, Handy had declared, an army would have found impossible.

But, if there was a disadvantage in small numbers, there was likewise an advantage. A small force was mobile—it could move rapidly.

It was early afternoon when the rough riders defiled out of Tajo with their horses and pack mules. Mexicans, from the doors and windows of their adobe houses, looked at the departing train as though for the last time, and shook their heads in gruesome foreboding.

They had seen many and many go the same way, and not one of the many had ever returned. "Wau Kean will get them," they whispered awesomely, one to another; "the brave gringoes will never see Tajo again."

Bud laughed hilariously, Ted was thoughtful but determined, Stella was calmly confident that her fight for the hoard would win, and Jimmie—who had charge of the pack mules—looked forward to the time when the most of the water-cans would be exchanged for six buckskin bags of treasure.

"They ain't expectin' ter see us ag'in," grinned Bud, "an' I don't know as ye can blame 'em. They ain't never met up with ther rough riders afore."

From Tajo, Ted and his friends went nine miles down the Cañon de las Palmas. In this cañon the old mission fathers had planted date-palms, and it was under a little grove of the palms that the rough riders halted to rest, fill their water receptacles from a spring, and make ready to attempt the desert when evening fell.

They were to do as much of the traveling as possible by night. Thus they would avoid the terrific heat of the day during a part of the journey, at least.

While daylight still lingered, Ted took his bearings with a spy-glass from the lower end of the cañon. He could see the distant range quite clearly, and marked out a tall pinnacle which he knew arose in the vicinity of Laguna Salado.

It was 8 o'clock in the evening when the King of the Wild West gave the order to start. He rode ahead, pointing the way. Behind him came the four pack mules, with Jimmie at the rear; on either side of the train rode Bud and Stella.

In this manner they debouched upon the desert. All around them was the velvet softness of the southern night, shot through with star-gleams and the rays of a round moon.

The gray sand reflected the light, so that a marvelous brilliancy enveloped the travelers. Their surroundings were clearly visible, and even the distant pinnacle toward which Ted was steering could be seen like a silver spire.

Nevertheless, the heat was terrific. The sand had stored up the sun's energy and was giving it off like a hot griddle. So hot was the footing, indeed, that the

horny hoofs of the horses danced over it for the first few miles until they became somewhat used to the discomfort.

Steadily, swiftly Ted pushed on. Not only did he keep hawklike watch of the pinnacle, but swept the plain constantly to right and left for signs of Cocopahs. But there were no Cocopahs in evidence.

"Thet there Taranch was puttin' up a bluff, Ted!" cried Bud, from behind. "He was goin' ter strike when we ambled over ther rim o' ther desert, wasn't he? Well, I ain't seen him doin' any strikin' yit."

"Keep a sharp lookout just the same, Bud," the King of the Wild West called back.

Jimmie, trailing along in the rear, was trying his set of balsas on the legs of the rear mule. Half a dozen times he got out of the saddle to pick up his rawhide rope, hopping up and down from the heat of the soil and scrambling back to the saddle again as quickly as he could.

"It's like standin' on a hot stove," he sang out. "Feels like the warm place wasn't more'n six inches down. But, honest, I can't see any Cocopah boys. Ted Strong is setting the pace an' they can't head us."

Frequent drafts were made on the water-cans, and at midnight Ted rounded up the caravan to rest all hands and water the horses and mules. Cold food was dealt out, and the live stock got a small ration of oats. By one o'clock the procession was on the move again.

For hour after hour the steady march went on, the silvered rock-pinnacle drawing gradually nearer. By dawn, forty miles had been covered: and when the sun popped over the eastern mountains, the expedition was again at rest.

The most difficult part of the journey had come. The remaining distance, perhaps twenty miles, must be covered under the scorching heat of the sun.

The spent animals, lying flat on the sand with tongues protruding their hides muddy with sweat and dust and breath coming pantingly, seemed wearing out even while at rest.

"Hyer's where ther tough part comes," muttered Bud, drawing one sleeve across his dripping face. "The air's jest like it come out o' a furnace. How ye makin' it, Stell?" He turned to the girl with the question.

"I'm doing well enough," she answered breathlessly.

But, like all the rest, she was fairly drooping with the heat. Jimmie, hunting the shade cast by one of the pack mules, was puffing like a winded dog.

"I'm beginnin' to wonder whether the hoard of the Cocopahs is worth all this," said he. "Will we ever git to the mountains or peter out this side like—like those lads did?"

He looked toward a heap of white bones—human bones—lying within a yard of him.

"Sure we'll get to the mountains, Jimmie," answered Ted. "Get up the mules, boy. We'll water the stock all around and push on."

How did they ever reach the mountains? Ted could not tell. They were two-thirds of that blistering day coming into the dismal uplifts; and, long before the journey was finished, every one of the four had been "touched" by the insufferable heat. One is "touched," they say, when the scorching rays affect the brain.

While pushing onward, with half-blinded eyes fixed on the pinnacle, Ted abruptly lost consciousness. When he came to himself, he and Stella were within the shadow of a steep, barren hill, their horses stretched out flat and gasping stertorously for breath.

Stella was lying flat on the rocks, unconscious. It was hot enough in the shade, yet far less hot than it was in the open.

Ted crept to his girl pard and chafed her forehead and hands. "Water!" she whispered; "water!"

Water! Ted staggered to his feet, and peered out over the flat of the desert with bloodshot eyes. He could see no moving thing.

Where were Bud and Jimmie? Where were the mules with the water-cans?

In that hour he thought of Taranch and the Cocopahs.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MUSHROOM ROCK.

Necessity for action stirred Ted and led him to put forth a fierce effort. He and Stella must have water—the horses must have water—or they would all die.

What had happened, Ted did not know. A hiatus intervened between that morning camp on the dry, heat-stricken flat and that patch of shade in the hills. Somewhere between those two places Bud, Jimmie, and the mules had been lost.

Yet, numbed though Ted's mind was, he could not think that Taranch and the Cocopahs had done away with his friends. If the Mexican outlaw had struck at the party, why had he spared Stella and Ted?

The King of the Wild West had a fund of tremendous strength. He pulled himself together now and labored up the bleak hillside. From the scorching crest, he looked away, shading his eyes with his hands.

A strange sight presented itself. Off toward the north were the salt waters of the lagoon. Half-way between the lagoon and the hill on which Ted was standing, Bud could be seen. He was sitting on the hot sand, juggling with the two lead balls at the ends of the balsa-rope. A little nearer Ted were the four pack mules, lying on the plain like so many dead animals. Not far from the mules Jimmie was lying, inert and motionless.

Ted was thunderstruck. After a little he started down the hill and went to the boy.

"Jimmie!" he called hoarsely, bending down and shaking him.

"I'm done for, all right," was the boy's drowsy answer. "All burned up, an'——"

Putting forth all his energy, Ted hoisted the boy to his feet.

"Wake up, Jimmie!" he called.

"I can't see a thing," answered Jimmie. "That you, Ted?"

"Yes."

"Where am I? Gee, but this is fierce."

"You're close to the hills." Ted got some water from one of the cans. "Here, drink this and you'll feel better."

Jimmie gulped down the water, and Ted drew another cupful for himself.

"Bud!" Ted called.

Bud paid no attention, but kept on juggling the lead balls. Again Ted called, but without getting Bud to look around.

What horrible witchery was this? Ted had been in hot

countries before, but never in such a region as this blighting Desert of Cocopah.

"I feel a whole lot better," spoke up Jimmie, "and I can see a little. It's a cinch that that water was what I needed."

"We must get the mules up, and into the hills," said Ted.

"I'll help," returned Jimmie. "Let's water 'em; mebby it'll do them as much good as it did me. Gee, but this topknot o' mine feels queer."

They staggered about until they had got a bucket. Filling the bucket, they gave each of the mules a few swallows, and the effect was almost magical. In spite of the brutes' heavy packs, they got them up without difficulty, and drove them to the place where Ted had left Stella.

"Give Stella some water, Jimmie," said Ted; "I'm going back after Bud."

Ted took a tin cup of water with him. Bud was mumbling to himself in a crazy undertone as he flung the lead balls into the air, and there was a stony light in his eyes when he looked at Ted.

"I say, Bud," said Ted, "drink this and it will help you."

Ted held the cup of water to Bud's lips. With a husky yell, Bud struck the cup from Ted's hands.

"I'm ther Duke o' Pokeropolis, I am!" he jabbered, "an' ye're the Sultan o' Hoboken. Consarn ye, I told ye we'd hev it out the next time ye crossed my trail. Now I'm goin' ter fix ye fer keeps."

With that, Bud jerked a revolver from his belt. Before he could use it, Ted had pulled the weapon from his hand. Bud clinched with him, and the two rolled over and over on the sand. Neither had much strength, and both were soon exhausted.

"Come on, Bud," said Ted, getting up, after a while. "We'll go over among the hills, and get in the shade."

"I'll put ther kibosh on ye yet, you tinhorn," snarled Bud. "I can see trees, an' waterfalls, an' grass, an' flowers, over there." He clutched his forehead with both hands and stared at the hills. "As soon's I git a drink, I'm comin' back ter take keer o' *you*. I don't keer if ye *hev* got two heads an' more legs n' a centipede; I'm one o' Ted Strong's rough riders, I am, an' no onnery ombray o' your size can git the best o' *me*."

Bud was seeing a mirage, and as the fancied scene took him directly toward the place where Stella and Jimmie had been left, Ted allowed him to stagger on. Getting Bud's horse to his feet, Ted followed his locoed comrade.

It was a difficult task getting Bud into the shade of the hill, but Jimmie helped, and so did Stella—for a drink of water had brought back her reason again.

Once pushed and hauled into the shade, Bud was thrown down on his back and water forced into his throat. He struggled, at first, but finally sank into an uneasy sleep.

"Rest is what we all need," said Ted, sinking at full length on the rocks. "If we want to do our work, and get out of this horrible place, we've got to take care of our strength."

Ted had no sooner closed his eyes than he was slumbering. He awoke after sundown, and found his three companions getting a meal ready. They all appeared to have recovered completely from the baneful effects of the heat.

"I'm shore beginnin' ter take some stock in what Handy said erbout this hyer infernal kentry," observed Bud. "I can't remember a thing thet happened arter we left our dry camp shortly arter sunup. Things got kinder black in front o' me, an' next I knew I woke up hyer."

"That's me, too, pard," put in Jimmie. "I went off my trolley somewheres between here an' that last camp o' ours, an' when I came to Ted was in front o' me with a dipper o' drink."

"That's just what happened to me," spoke up Stella. "This desert is a terrible place. I don't wonder that people who come into it never live to get away."

"If I'd known what we had to go through," said Jimmie, "that hoard o' the Cocopahs could 'a' stayed right here till the day o' judgment for all o' me."

"Anything that's worth having, Jimmie," observed Stella, "is worth fighting for. Your father went through all this, and it wasn't the heat that got the best of him, either."

"Taranch did that," said the boy, "an' he may do the same for us. We're all li'ble to git the gaff an' never see Tajo ag'in."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Ted. "I thought there was more fight in you than that, Jimmie."

"As for me, I don't care; see? It's you fellers an' Stella that's givin' me this horrible sorry. I brought you into it, an' if you don't get back——"

The boy's lip quivered. Stella dropped a kindly hand on his shoulder.

"We're all going to get back safely, Jimmie," said she. "Whenever the rough riders set out to do a thing, they usually accomplish it."

"Bet yer spurs!" averred Bud.

After they had finished their meal, and the live stock had eaten the last of another ration of oats, the party started south along the foot of the hills. They had not far to go before they came to a sort of gully, running up into the bleak mountains. At the mouth of the gully, with a level of sand all around it, stood a huge boulder, full forty feet high, and shaped a good deal like an immense hour-glass.

"There's the Mushroom Rock," said Ted. "Get the pick and shovel, Bud, and we'll fall to and look for Dave Walker's cache."

"Dad could have saved us a lot o' diggin'," said Jimmie, "if he'd told us whereabouts at the bottom o' this rock he'd buried the gold."

"He put everythin' in thet letter he had time to, I reckon," returned Bud. "A hull lot o' ombrays wouldn't hev taken the trouble ter write at all, Jimmie, seein' as how sartin death was starin' 'em in the face."

"While you coves dig, I'm goin' to nose around lookin' for dad's hut," went on the boy. "Dad said it was near here."

"Don't get too far away, Jimmie, whatever you do," cautioned Ted. "There may be enemies near us, you know."

"I'll keep both lamps peeled for trouble," answered the boy, and started up the gully.

The King of the Wild West and Bud went to probing about the base of the rock. Stella was back a little distance, keeping an eye on the horses and looking anxiously up the ravine where Jimmie had disappeared.

Ted and Bud were deeply interested in their work. It wasn't every day that they went poking into the hot

sands after gold. And it took six buckskin bags to hold the hoard of the Cocopahs!

The strange thing about the day's fearsome experience was that it did not appear to have left the least bad effect. Rest, food, water, and shade had pulled the rough riders together remarkably. It was still hot, even with the sun down, but the air was so much cooler than during the day that Ted and Bud were able to work with all their energy.

"S'posin' Taranch an' his outfit found ther cache arter they'd sponged out Walker?" said Bud, leaning on the handle of his shovel. "They shore must hev hunted fer ther gold."

"They hunted for it, no doubt," answered Ted, who was using the pick in the rock's shadow, "but they never found it, Bud."

"Got a 'hunch' ter thet effect, pard?"

"I've got more than a hunch. Look here!"

Ted dropped his pick and heaved something out into the moonlight. It was a buckskin sack, and a large one.

"Whoop!" exulted Bud. "Thar's ther gold, shore 'nuff. I reckon Jimmie's fixed up fer life, purvidin' we can git away with the hoard fer him, an'——"

A shrill cry for help came from up the gully.

"Jimmie!" came excitedly from Stella, "something has happened to him! I didn't think we ought to let him go."

The cry was not repeated. Stella, Ted, and Bud all three started up the gully.

"Wait!" said Ted. "We can't all leave. You and Stella stay here, Bud, and watch the live stock and the gold. It won't do to run the risk of losing our cattle, or the hoard—now that we have found it. I'll go and look for the boy."

"But if Taranch or the Cocopahs are there——" began Stella.

"They'll get a warm greeting from me if they are," broke in Ted grimly, starting along the gloomy cut. "Don't fail to be vigilant, Bud. Everything depends upon the horses and the mules—and the mules' packs. I knew we would have trouble with Taranch, but I wasn't expecting him to play a card of this kind."

"You look out fer yerself an' Jimmie," shouted Bud, "an' Stell an' me'll take care o' things hyer."

CHAPTER X.

JIMMIE'S LIFE OR THE HOARD?

The King of the Wild West did a good deal of quick thinking while he was racing up the dark gulch. Suppose Taranch had discovered, in some way, that the rough riders were going after the Cocopah hoard? And suppose Taranch had been playing a waiting game, in order to let the rough riders break into David Walker's cache and reveal the place of the hidden gold? These suppositions were in line with Taranch's wily character.

David Walker had said in his letter that Taranch and El Lobo wanted the Cocopah treasure for themselves; and if Walker had hidden the hoard where Taranch could not find it, then it would have been "good business" for Taranch to let the rough riders cross the desert unmolested and find the hoard for him. Then, after the gold was brought to light, Taranch could proceed to put the rough riders out of the way and appropriate it—if he could.

The capture of Jimmie—if he had been captured—might only have been a ruse to lure Ted and his friends away from the gold and the horses and mules.

Rounding a curve in the gulch, the King of the Wild West came upon a sort of hovel, roughly built under an overhanging ledge of the gulch wall. A little moonlight drifted down from the gulch rim so that Ted was able to see the rude dwelling with tolerable distinctness.

The ledge projected from the cliff's face about six or seven feet from the bottom, and three stone walls had been built up to cover the space between the ground and the under side of the ledge. There was an opening in the front wall that had evidently served as a doorway. Before Ted entered, he paused to look and listen for signs of Taranch and his Cocopahs.

An ominous silence prevailed. Ted could neither see nor hear anything of the outlaws.

There might be some of the gang hiding in the house, waiting for him to make a target of himself in the doorway. Clutching a revolver in his hand, the King of the Wild West approached the doorway noiselessly, then rushed for the interior of the hut.

His entrance did not arouse any hostile movement. Blank darkness shrouded the interior of the primitive dwelling. The same ominous silence continued.

Cautiously Ted struck a match. The single room the hut contained measured about ten feet square. There was no one there, except——

An exclamation fell from Ted's lips and he recoiled, staring. A heap of human bones and some shreds of rough clothing lay in one corner.

Walker! Jimmie's father! A sickening sensation rushed along the King of the Wild West's nerves.

If Jimmie had come there, and if he had seen—*that!* Ted shuddered, got the whip-hand of himself, and continued his survey of the room.

It was entirely bare of anything in the shape of furniture. Walker had plainly lived a hard life while seeking to win a fortune for himself and his son.

And that niche in the wall was the scene of his last stand against the murderous Mexicans and Cocopahs! From there he had sent the carrier-pigeon to Carlos Enriques, in far-away Ensenada!

Yet the King of the Wild West had no time for sentiment. Jimmie had surely come there, and what had befallen him?

"Jimmie!" he shouted, ignoring the danger of locating himself to the outlaws in the hope of getting some reply from the boy.

A mocking silence was the only answer. Ted left the hut, still carrying his revolver in readiness, and continued slowly on up the gulch. The dead stillness was oppressive. Not even the yelp of a wolf or the howl of a coyote shivered out upon the night air. Only the crunch of Ted's shoes echoed through the gully.

The longer he searched, the more the hopelessness of his attempt to find the boy was borne in upon him. With lurking enemies all around, what could he accomplish by night in that desolate and unfamiliar region?

Yet still he continued on, hoping against hope that he might find some clue to Jimmie's whereabouts. It was only when a distant report of firearms reached him from the direction of Mushroom Rock that he whirled and retraced his steps.

At last Taranch and his Cocopahs were showing their hands. They had attempted to appropriate the horses and

mules and the gold, and Bud and Stella were standing them off.

The King of the Wild West raced stumblingly back toward the gulch entrance. Long before he reached Mushroom Rock the shooting had died away in the same ominous silence that had surrounded him ever since he had left his companions to search for Jimmie.

What did this mean? Had Bud and Stella been overpowered?

Ted slowed his pace as he drew nearer the moonlit level of the desert. His eyes, searching the spot where Stella had been left with the horses and mules, failed to discover any trace of the animals.

For an instant, Ted's heart sank. Then, once more, he lifted his voice, and gave the old Moon Valley yell.

Hardly had the echoes died away when the yell was answered from the shadow that lay westward of Mushroom Rock. A feeling of relief rushed over the leader of the rough riders.

"Where are you, Bud?" he called.

"Rounded up around ther base o' ther Rock," Bud shouted back.

"Are you all right?"

"Shore; but Stella an' me had our hands full fer a minute."

Ted started across the level stretch and stumbled over the body of a Cocopah. Evidently Bud and Stella had not been wasting their ammunition.

In a few moments, Ted was at the base of the rock. The horses and mules were all there, and Bud and Stella, from opposite sides of the rock, were keeping vigilant watch for Taranch and the Cocopahs.

"Did you find Jimmie, Ted?" Stella asked anxiously.

"No," replied Ted regretfully. "It's as dark as a stack of black cats up the gulch, and it was a hard matter to make a search. I found Walker's hut, but Jimmie wasn't there."

"We shouldn't have let him go," said Stella.

Ted was of the same opinion.

"We hadn't seen any sign of enemies," he explained, "and I knew the hut couldn't be a great way from Mushroom Rock. Then, too, I thought Jimmie was sharp enough to take care of himself."

"He's sharp enough, Ted," answered Stella, "but, like the rest of us, he was probably overconfident."

"What happened here?" asked Ted.

"You hadn't been gone long," Bud returned, "when a pack o' reds swooped down at us from the hillside. I reckon they thort we'd all gone up ther gulch ter look fer Jimmie, an' thet they'd hev an easy time. But we fooled 'em," Bud added grimly. "Stell an' I turned loose with our hardware, an' they scampered off like rats. They was plumb surprised, I'll bet. Thet was quite a spell ago, an' ther varmints hevn't showed up since."

Ted was more than ever convinced that the spiriting away of Jimmie was merely a trick to get all of them up the gulch. Stella started to speak, but before a word had left her lips a voice floated down from the boulder-strewn slope at the right of the gulch entrance.

"Hola! Gringoes!"

Bud jumped. "Listen ter thet!" he exclaimed, peering upward at the shadowy hillside. "One o' ther coyotes is hailin' us. I'll bet a poncho I can put a bullet within a couple o' feet o' him, anyway."

Bud lifted his revolver.

"No," said Ted, pushing the weapon aside; "we'll hear what the fellow has to say." He faced the slope. "Hello, up there!" he answered. "What do you want?"

"You are Ted Strong, hey?" came back through the night.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Taranch." A daredevil laugh accompanied the word. "You have heard of me, hey? You *sabe* Taranch, sure."

"Yes, I've heard of you."

"You get my *carta* by arrow, in Tajo, saying that you no make *pasear* in the desert?"

"I got that."

"And yet you make *pasear*, all the same." The voice laughed again. "You *mucho bravo*, Ted Strong. I let you cross the desert to the mountains so you show me where Walker hide the gold, the hoard. *Diablo*, how easy you have make *pasear* into my snare! You have find the *oro*, good. I like what you do so well I spare your life, me, Taranch. *Sabe?*"

"Oh, let me lam loose with a bullet, Ted," growled Bud. "I can locate him easy by ther sound o' thet bazoo o' his."

The King of the Wild West laid a restraining hand on Bud's arm.

"That's kind of you, Taranch," called Ted sarcastically.

"But there is some condition, you understand," went on the voice from the hillside.

"What is the condition?"

"You look for the boy, the *nino*, hey? You no have find the *nino?*"

"What about the boy?"

"He is by me, my Cocopahs have him safe. You wish for to save his life?"

"Of course we want to save his life."

"Then, lis'en: You leave the hoard at the rock, you go to the Laguna Salado, an' you wait there. When I have find the gold, then I let the boy come to you. Is it well, señor?"

There was a moment's silence; then Bud began saying things under his breath.

"Suppose we do not go to the Laguna Salado," went on Ted, "and suppose we do not leave the hoard here for you?"

"Then the boy, he die, an' afterward I get the hoard anyhow. I speak, me, Taranch. What I say I do, you will have find I do. *Sabe* the burro?"

It seemed incredible that even such a scoundrel as Taranch could make such a bloodthirsty threat.

"We must do something, Ted," murmured Stella. "We must not let that murderous villain do any harm to the boy."

Before either Ted or Bud could say a word further, a sharp, clear-cut voice echoed from somewhere on the hill:

"The handy-boy is joshin' you, Ted! Don't let him string you. He hasn't got me an' he won't get me. Hang onto the hoard an' *wait*."

It was Jimmie's voice, there was no doubt of that.

CHAPTER XI.

MYSTERY.

"Jumpin' sand-hills!" growled Bud, fearfully perplexed. "Thet's Jimmie, straight enough. He says Taranch ain't

got him, an' Taranch says he has. But, say! If Taranch ain't got him, why ain't he hyer? What's Jimmie hangin' around up there fer?"

"Where are you, Jimmie?" shouted Ted.

The boy did not answer.

"Hello, Taranch!" went on Ted.

A mocking laugh, indisputably given by the Mexican, floated down from the hill. But there was no other answer. Following the mocking laugh, silence shrouded the hill in mystery. Although both Bud and Ted shouted and called at the top of their lungs, they could not get any response.

"What do you suppose is the matter?" queried Stella.

"It's too much for me, Stella," said Ted. "Taranch says he has got Jimmie and will put him out of the way if we do not give up the gold, and then Jimmie himself speaks out and tells us that Taranch hasn't got him and can't get him. But, as Bud says, what is Jimmie up there among our enemies for, if Taranch hasn't got him? I can't figure it out."

"It's a brain-twister," averred Bud. "Jest as soon as Jimmie turns up, all of a sudden everythin' stops. We can't talk with Jimmie, an' we can't talk with Taranch. Wonder if I've got another touch o 'ther sun?"

"What shall we do, Ted?" asked Stella

"We'll do as Jimmie says—keep the gold."

"And stay here?"

"I don't know where we could find a better place. We're pretty fair targets, though. It's a wonder to me that Taranch and his Indians don't blaze away at us with their gun."

"It's a purty safe guess, Ted, thet they haven't any guns," said Bud.

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, there wasn't any firin' when the Cocopahs mad thet other attack on us, an' the one or two we dropped didn't hev nothin' but balsas an' knives. Thet gang 'u'd open on us, all right, if they had any artillery. No, Ted, they ain't heeled; mind what I say."

Undoubtedly Bud was correct. Strange as it seemed to Ted, all the evidence went to prove that neither the Mexican nor his followers had any firearms.

And this in the face of the fact that when Taranch, El Lobo, and the other two racing outlaws met Ted and Bud in the arroyo north of Campo, they were well armed. Many things were happening, that night, which the King of the Wild West could not understand.

"I suppose the mystery will solve itself," remarked Ted. "If we do what Jimmie advised, and that is, hang onto the gold and wait. We'll wait, and right here is as good a place to wait as any. There's a stretch of flat desert all around this rock, and if we're watchful no one can approach without being seen. You can go on sentry duty, Stella, while Bud and I get out the rest of the hoard."

Stella, in obedience with Ted's suggestion, stepped to the front of the rock, placing herself in such a position that she could view all sides; then, from the cache, Ted and Bud brought up one buckskin bag after another until all six lay heaped at the rock's base.

The King of the Wild West opened one of the sacks. Taking out a handful of the sack's contents, he stepped clear of the rock's shadow, into the moonlight.

"Nuggets," said he tersely, "as big as birds' eggs."

"No wonder Taranch is dead set on annexin' this bunch o' treasure!" commented Bud. "He'd hev ter fool the Cocopahs, though, if he ever got away with the stuff. Those reds, if I got Handy right, claim this loot belongs to some one o' their heathen gods—a joss by ther name o Wau Kean."

"Taranch is merely making tools of the Cocopahs," Ted answered. "He uses them to help him commit his criminal deeds and undoubtedly he was planning to slip away from the tribe some time, and take the hoard with him."

Ted replaced the nuggets in the sack and retied the top with a heavy thong. Then he lifted the bag up and down, trying to approximate its weight. Presently he passed the bag to Bud and asked him to heft it.

"How much will it weigh?" Ted inquired, as Bud swung the bag in his hands.

"Thirty pounds, I reckon," said Bud; "mebby a leetle better than that."

"Thirty pounds!" exclaimed Stella. "That's four hundred and eighty ounces, avoirdupois."

"At $20 an ounce," added Ted, "the contents of that bag stands at about $10,000."

"And there are six bags!" gasped Stella.

"Makin' a total o' $60,000," chimed in Bud. "Oh, I dunno. If I was young Monte Cristo, up there somewhere on the hill, I reckon I'd come down an' look arter this hyer boodle pussonly."

"We've got to save the treasure for Jimmie," said Ted. "His father paid dearly for it—I saw David Walker's bones in that hut up the gully."

"Thet same Dave Walker must hev been a man of uncommon nerve," said Bud. "He's shore fixed the kid out so'st he won't hev ter do nothin' but claim his three squares a day an' take life easy."

"Jimmie isn't that kind of a boy, Bud," asserted Stella. "He's got it in him to become a good and useful man, and it would take more than the hoard of the Cocopahs to make him any different."

"Well," returned Bud, "Jimmie has crawled inter a hole, some'r's, an' pulled ther hole in arter him."

"And all we can do is to wait until he shows himself," finished Ted. "Hunt out a soft place around the foot of the rock, Stella, and try and get a little sleep. The same for you, too, Bud. I'll go on guard. Remember, to-morrow is likely to be a warm day in more ways than one."

"I'd like powerful well ter make a scout up thet hill over there," muttered Bud.

"It's a strategetical mistake to divide a small force in the face of an enemy with more men," answered Ted. "It was an error of that kind that got General Custer into trouble on the Little Bighorn. There are only three of us, and probably ten times as many Cocopahs. So we'll hang together."

"What gits me, Ted, is this: If Taranch has so many reds at his back, why don't he set 'em on ter rush us? We could knock over a few durin' the rush, but they could pile on so deep they'd smother us."

"That's a thing that gets me, too, Bud," said Ted. "It can't be that Taranch has any especial regard for the lives of a few Cocopahs. But that is only one of a number of details that surprises me. Taranch's lack of guns is also a hard thing to understand. If he had firearms when he made his run from Campo, why hasn't he firearms here? Then, again, the biggest mystery of all concerns Jimmie. He isn't a prisoner; and yet, if he has his liberty, why doesn't he come here and join us?"

"Pass ther ante, pard," mumbled Bud. "If ye're bound ter stand guard, then I'll drap down in ther sand an' take a snooze."

"See that the horses and mules are all right, first, Bud."

Bud made sure of that. "I'll relieve ye in a couple o' hours, Ted," said he. "You've got ter hev some rest as well as Stella an' me."

Presently Bud was snoring, and Ted was pacing his lonely march around in front of Mushroom Rock, carefully watching lest any of the Cocopahs should steal upon them across the moonlit desert.

Ted gave a good deal of thought to the mystery of their situation, but could make nothing of it. Everything remained silent in the hills, and there was not a sound to suggest the proximity of Taranch and the Cocopahs.

Bud awoke, two or three hours after he had lain down, and told Ted to lie down while he went on guard. With a final warning to Bud, the King of the Wild West stretched himself out across the sacks of gold. If any attack should be made, the men who tried to get the treasure would have a warm time of it.

Ted was tired and went to sleep immediately. How long he slept he did not know, but he was aroused by a wild whoop from Bud. Ted was on his feet in a flash, revolvers in hand. A moment later Stella, excited and apprehensive, came around the base of the rock and joined him.

"What's happened, Ted?" she asked.

"Don't know, Stella. I heard a yell from Bud, and when I jumped up I expected to see the Cocopahs pouring in on us."

There were no Cocopahs in sight, and Ted and Stella skirmished around the rock until they came to Bud. He was leaning against the rock, a perfect picture of chagrin and despair.

"What's gone wrong, Bud?" demanded Ted.

"Oh, I'm a winner, I am!" stuttered Bud, looking as though he had taken a dose of something that didn't agree with him; "I'm more kinds o' one o' them long-eared he-haws than I know how ter mention!"

He flung his head back and struck it viciously against the hard granite behind him. It must have hurt, for he struck full on the spot that had already encountered the piece of lead on the Cocopah's balsa-rope, but Bud never winked.

"What's the matter?" persisted Ted.

"I wisht I was twins so'st I could kick myself clean acrost ther desert ter Tajo!" yelped Bud.

"Will you stop finding fault with yourself long enough to tell us what's happened?"

"Well," growled Bud, "ther chuck's gone, ther water's gone, an' one o' ther mules is gone. Ain't thet enough ter purty nigh knock a feller slabsided? An' all this happened, mind ye, while I was standin' guard."

CHAPTER XII.

AT CLOSE QUARTERS.

This was certainly astounding news! Day was at hand, a day whose smothering heat was not to be borne without plenty of drinking-water constantly at hand. And food. How could they exist in those barren hills without their provisions?

It was truly a brain-staggering situation that had suddenly confronted them. Because of this mishap, their expedition was likely to prove a failure; not only that, but their very lives quivered in the balance.

The King of the Wild West stared at his girl pard. The situation was grave beyond the power of words to express.

Already the mules and horses were panting with the heat, stirring restlessly and rolling their eyes dumbly upon their masters as though begging for water. Stella's face went white. Ted turned sternly on Bud.

"How did this come about, Bud?" he asked.

"Thet's one too many fer me."

"Did you go to sleep on duty?"

"Not on yer life I didn't!" stormed Bud. "Ever since I took yer place, Ted, I've been as wide-awake as ye see me now."

"You looked at the stock and our equipment just before I went on watch?"

"Shore I did, an' everythin' was all right."

"Then this may have happened while I was doing guard-duty," said Ted, generously seeking to divide the blame with his brave comrade.

"I ain't a-thinkin' nothin' o' ther kind," growled Bud.

"Still, it's a fact. Of course the Cocopahs did it."

Ted stepped out into the growing sun-glare and walked for several yards, his eyes on the surface of the ground. Presently he hastened back. "Come," he went on authoritatively, "there's not an instant to waste. A minute's unnecessary delay may mean all the difference between life and death. The Cocopahs left a plain trail, and we must follow it. Help me get the gold, Bud, and secure the bags to the pack-saddles."

Bud and Stella realized as clearly as Ted the necessity of haste. After a long rest there was vigor still left in the animals—enough, it might be, to enable the rough riders to overhaul the thieving Cocopahs.

In a wondrously brief space of time the three remaining mules were loaded with the six bags of treasure, for Ted had no intention of leaving that behind. Taranch had played a trump-card when he set his Cocopahs on to steal the rough riders' food and water; if Ted could help himself, the scoundrelly Mexican should not profit by his murderous cunning.

"I reckon Taranch has struck, all right," gritted Bud, coiling his riata more snugly to the saddle-horn as he rode.

"He could not have struck a blow that would have put us in greater peril," declared Ted. "He wants us to fall victims to this unbearable heat; then he can come down on us and get the hoard of the Cocopahs merely for the trouble of taking it from our dead burros."

Bud fumed wildly.

"However thet trick was done is more'n I kin imagine," he scowled.

"I have heard," continued Ted, "that these Cocopahs are more wily than the Apaches. They have snakelike cunning, and can crawl over the sand with as little noise as a side-winder."

"They must hev had cayuses with 'em," said Bud, "or they'd never hev been able ter tote off all them water-cans. But whyever did they take one mule an' leave the rest?"

"They probably needed the mule to help tote the water-cans."

For a hundred yards the trail Ted and his friends were following consisted of a lone burro's tracks. That distance covered, the hoof-prints of three horses went along side by side with the burro's.

"Understand how it was done now, Bud?" asked Ted.

"Three of the Cocopahs rode to this point with their horses. The horses were left here while the reds wriggled onward to the rock and lifted the water-cans and the rest of the stuff. Bringing our outfit here, they packed in on their three horses and found the loads were too bulky. Then they went back after the mule."

"Reckon thet must hev been ther way of it," grunted Bud. "Ter a man [illegible] sneakin' critter."

"I ought to have been doing my share of guard-duty last night," spoke up Stella. "If there had been two of us on guard all the time, instead of one, this couldn't have happened."

"There's no use crying over spilt milk, anyhow," admonished Ted. "We've got to overhaul those confounded Cocopahs before our horses play out."

"An' likewise afore we play out ourselves," added Bud. "If ther hull passel o' us was ter git a touch o' the [illegible] like what we did yesterday, I reckon Stella's fight fer the hoard o' the Cocopahs would come ter a purty sudden wind-up."

All three of them were thinking of this. The sun was shooting toward the zenith and the heat was constantly increasing.

The trail led off in the direction of the Laguna Salada, but, although they were constantly straining their eyes ahead, they could see nothing of the pilfering Cocopahs.

"Perhaps," suggested Stella, "Taranch went into hiding, back near the entrance to the gulch, expecting to descend on Mushroom Rock, after we had left, and get the gold."

"No doubt," assented Ted grimly. "It was for that very reason that I have brought the three mules and the treasure along with us."

"If Taranch counted on drivin' us inter a panic," said Bud, "I reckon he's got another guess comin'."

"I wonder where Jimmie is?" mused Stella.

"Jimmie will have to take care of himself for a while," said Ted. "The one vital point that concerns us now is getting back our water and provisions."

"Jumpin' sand-hills!" yelled Bud, rising in his stirrups and pointing. "Injuns, or I'm a gopher!"

Ted and Stella looked in the direction indicated by Bud's pointing finger. Bud was right. A party of eight horsemen, who had seemingly sprung out of the very sands of the desert, were dashing toward them pell-mell. Six only—seven of the party were Indians, and some of these were the [illegible] had made off with the rough riders' water and provisions. The eighth man was a Mexican, and all were riding light.

The Indians exactly resembled the two Cocopahs to whom Bud had already had an introduction. As they came littering down over the hot sand, their long black hair streamed out behind them, and the leaden spheres of their balsas described wide, wicked-looking circles in the air.

"They haven't any guns," said Ted: "that's sure. And if they haven't any shooters, we don't need to use ours. I'll match our riatas against their balsas any day you can find in the calendar. Besides," Ted finished sternly, "that big rascal in front is Taranch, and I have a keen desire to take him back to Tajo alive."

"We kin do it," said Bud. "Now thet we got thet bunch in the open, we'll give 'em a taste of our Moon Valley way o' doin' things."

The rough riders began at once to get their riatas in readiness.

Taranch, who was well in the lead of his pack, and sailing along on a big black horse, was of a different caliber than the usual run of Mexicans.

He was a well set-up man, much larger than the average of his countrymen, and wore the customary bell-crowned hat. A buckskin shirt covered the upper part of his body, his black trousers were slashed at the bottoms and laced with tinsel cord, and about his waist was a gaudy sash. He rode well, too, which was doubtless the result of his early vaquero training.

Taranch's horse was equipped with full riding-gear. The horses of the Cocopahs, on the other hand, had nothing upon them in the shape of leather or rope.

The leader of the band was armed with balsas, like the rest, and as he dashed toward the rough riders he whirled the twin balls with grace and precision. Close at his heels a big Cocopah buck was slashing along. The rest of the Indians were some distance away, but making mad efforts to reach the scene of the projected encounter.

"Look out, Ted!" cried Stella. "Taranch is making for you!"

Hardly had the words left the girl's lips when the whirling balls leaped from the Mexican's hand as though launched by a powerful spring. The balls darted straight toward Ted, opening out as they neared him.

"Duck, Ted!" whooped Bud.

Ted "ducked" at the proper moment and the balls, with their taut buckskin cord, swished over his head, passed on, and caught Bud himself just below the shoulders. Then the leaden spheres began describing circles about Bud, the rope entangling him helplessly.

Bud was hurled from the saddle. An oath in the Spanish tongue went up from Taranch. Leaving Ted to be dealt with by the Cocopah behind, Taranch swerved his horse in the direction of the pack mules. Then Stella rushed into the game. Her riata whirled about her head and shot outward, the noose settling over the Mexican's head and lodging on his shoulders. The speed of Taranch's horse caused the slack of the rope to be rapidly taken up, and the noose to tighten.

While these exciting details were going forward, Ted had spurred in the direction of the Cocopah.

"Look out fer ther pesky rope, Ted!" shouted Bud, struggling to free himself, but watching the King of the Wild West as he made ready to use his riata.

Before the six Cocopahs in the rear could get close enough to take an active part, Taranch had been jerked out of his saddle and dropped on the ground, Ted had dodged another set of balsas and had roped the thrower of them, and Bud had struggled clear of the rawhide mesh that entangled him, remounted his horse, and started for the six riders who were sliding toward him and his pards across the plain.

The capture of Taranch was having a depressing effect upon the Cocopahs. They continued to advance, but at greatly diminished speed.

As Bud rode forward to meet them, he saw more Indians galloping out of the hills. Watching the combat from the uplifts, these Cocopahs had seen the hard luck which had befallen their leader, and were now rushing to his rescue.

There were at least a score of reds in the second party, and among them were three bucks riding heavily laden horses, while a loose mule, likewise heavily packed, could be seen coming onward with the horsemen.

At that moment it looked to Bud as though it was to

be all day with him, and Ted, and Stella. What could the three of them do against a force of twenty-six Cocopahs?

Bud, however, was mad as a hornet. Twice he had been bowled over by a set of balsas, and it galled him. Now, too, he had got his eye on the property which had been taken from Mushroom Rock during the night, and realizing what the recovery of this property meant to him and his friends, he stood up in his stirrups, flourished a six-shooter in each hand, and made a bee-line for the largest party of Cocopahs.

CHAPTER XIII.

ROUNDED-UP.

There was a peculiar thing about this clash with the Indians, and that was that there had been no war-whoops, no shouting, no unnecessary noise. The Cocopahs, grim and silent, were attending strictly to business. Such a thing was most unusual in Indian warfare, for, as a rule, the red man goes into battle yelling like a demon.

Bud, slashing onward through the blistering heat, began using his guns before the balsas got in the air. The sharp detonation of firearms had a weird effect upon the Cocopahs and the effect was instantaneous.

The balsas dropped out of the air, the Indians halted their horses, and all, with one accord, faced eastward in the direction of Mushroom Rock and the gully. There were three bucks who did not take part in this general movement, and they were the three who had ridden the heavily loaded horses. They were lying face downward in the sand, where they had been dropped by a volley from Bud's guns.

The bucks who were upright on their horses continued to face eastward, from time to time lifting their hands above their heads. Bud, naturally, was filled with astonishment on account of this queer proceeding; then his astonishment left him as he saw a chance to take advantage of the odd situation.

The three packed horses and the mule were not a great distance from Bud. With a sudden use of his spurs, he forged onward, cut out the four animals, and drove them toward the spot where Stella and Ted were holding the other pack mules. Not one Indian raised a hand to interfere with Bud; they were sitting their horses as though entranced, and seemed to be oblivious of everything that was taking place around them.

"What sort of a rhinecaboo are these hyer Cocopah boys tryin' ter run in on us, anyways?" called out Bud, as he drove the pack-animals down on Ted and Stella.

"They appear to be engaged in some kind of a prayer," answered Ted. "They are facing the east, and their eyes are closed."

"A feller could steal ther cayuses right out from under 'em, an' I don't believe they'd try ter stop him. There's ther water an' chuck thet was stolen from us, Ted. If them reds'll oblige by stayin' jest like they is fer a brace o' shakes, it'll give us a chance ter hike fer safer quarters."

"We've got to get into the shade, and do it quick," said Ted. "Help me heave Taranch over his horse, Bud, and then you trail him along."

"I'll be dashed if I wasn't fergittin' all erbout Taranch." Bud looked down at the outlaw, who was lying in the sand, with a riata lashed about his wrists and ankles. "An' 'twas Stella as done it!" exclaimed Bud. "Wonder what Handy'll say when he hears *thet?*"

"Neither Handy nor any one else will ever hear of it if we don't scatter out of this, *muy pronto*," flung back the King of the Wild West. "Lend a hand here, Bud."

Bud slipped to the ground, and he and Ted picked up the Mexican and laid him across the back of his horse, which Stella was holding. The Cocopah, who had been badly stunned when Ted roped him and jerked him from his horse, was left lying unconscious on the ground. Ted and Bud regained their saddles; and, while Stella and Ted drove the horses and mules before them, Bud followed with the led-horse and the prisoner.

The whole outfit of Cocopahs were still sitting rigid on their mounts, facing the east, and with eyes closed.

"Wouldn't thet jest nat'rally rattle yer spurs?" called Bud, looking back at the silent horsemen. "Every buck in ther bunch is plum locoed."

"It's mighty queer," said Stella, "but it was a good thing for us, just the same. If the Indians had rushed us, they'd have got the gold, rescued Taranch, and taken the three of us prisoners."

"Yet there they set," whooped Bud, "like a lot o' stoughten-bottles, dead on their feet, as ye might say. Somethin' er other has gloomed 'em up. Now I think o' it, they went bug-house erbout ther time I opened up with my shooters."

"It certainly looked as though your shooting had something to do with it, Bud," agreed Ted. "Evidently, the Cocopahs don't like firearms, but what is there about gun-play that makes them act like that?"

This was a question none of them could answer, and Ted, Bud, and Stella devoted their energies to hustling back to Mushroom Rock before the Cocopahs came out of their trance.

They were not long in getting back to their old stamping-ground, and they noticed at once that something had been going on there during their absence. A strong, disagreeable odor hovered about the Rock, and its sides were streaked with a dark, viscuous-looking liquid which had seemingly dribbled over the edge from the top. For many yards about the base of the oddly shaped boulder the sand had a discolored look, and was sticky under foot.

But the most gruesome change in the surroundings was caused by the two dead Cocopahs, slain the night before. These Indians had been taken from the desert, conveyed to the top of Mushroom Rock, and were there, standing rigidly upright, lashed back to back.

When Stella's eyes beheld this spectacle, she gave a gasp of horror and looked away.

"Things hev been goin' on hyer since we left, pard," remarked Bud. "Smells like a glue-factory. Phew! Ain't there any other place where we can go inter camp?"

"We'll stop here for a while," said Ted; "long enough, at least, to water the animals, give them something to eat, and to dig up a hand-out for ourselves."

They clustered in the shade of the foul-smelling boulder and relieved their thirst and fast while the stony, unseeing eyes of the two dead Cocopahs were fixed upon them.

"We have been going through one horror after another ever since we entered this desert," said Stella, with a

shudder. "Something happens every minute to make one's flesh creep!"

"That's so, Stella," said Ted; "but we won't be here much longer. We're only waiting for Jimmie now. As soon as he comes, we'll take our prisoner and the hoard, and hike for the Cañon de las Palmas and Tajo. We have accomplished all that we came here to do, and the quicker we pull out now, the better."

"We couldn't start across ther desert until night, anyways," put in Bud. "An' say, I feel more like jubilatin' over ther capter o' Taranch than I do over corrallin' Walker's gold. Both were plumb easy, though—easier'n I ever thought they'd be."

"The hardest part of both jobs was getting across the desert," said Ted. "When that was accomplished, the superstitious Cocopahs made the rest easy. I never heard of such a tribe as——"

"Look there!" shouted Bud, suddenly springing to his feet.

From the rocks on the hillside a pair of balsas had been hurled into the air. The middle of the rawhide rope was lashed about a blazing firebrand. With a hiss, the balsas and the firebrand described an arc in the air, and plumped down in the sand at the foot of Mushroom Rock.

"Another queer move!" cried Bud.

Ted started toward the bit of burning débris, as though to stamp out the flame; but, before he could reach it, the sand around the foot of the rock began to burn, and long tongues of fire reached upward along the side of the boulder.

"We'll have to get out of here, and be quick about it," said Ted. "Hustle, Bud! Start the horses and mules. That stuff on the boulder and in the sand is crude petroleum! We'll be burned alive if we don't clear out."

The rough riders worked with feverish energy, but, in spite of their fierce efforts, it seemed as though the fiuriously spreading flames would get the better of them. The horses and mules were frightened, and began to stampede. Ted had told Bud to do nothing but look after Taranch, as soon as it was manifest that the stock would get up of themselves, and Bud had ridden away with the prisoner on the back of the led-horse.

Ted and Stella, thereupon, caught up their own mounts, and began milling the pack-animals. While they were engaged in the work, a voice floated down to them through the haze of smoke caused by the burning oil:

"Hot-foot it for the hut in the gully! The reds are roundin' you up! Hustle for the hut, an' wait there till I meet up with you to-night!"

It was Jimmie's voice again! Jimmie's voice, coming to them mysteriously from somewhere on the hill! There was no time to speculate as to where Jimmie was, for a glance toward the open showed them the Cocopahs slowly riding in from the desert, spreading out in such a way as to cut off the rough riders' retreat in that direction.

"Do you hear, Bud?" shouted Ted. "Jimmie tells us to make for the hut in the gully!"

"I heerd thet, all right!" yelled Bud, from some place in the cloud of smoke.

"Then do as he says! Stella and I will drive in the animals!"

Once the frenzied horses and mules were headed for the gully, they rushed into it pell-mell. Ted and Stella slashed along behind. Looking back, just within the gully-entrance, they saw Mushroom Rock laved with fire, the two gruesome figures on its crest lapped in flame.

"Horrible!" panted Stella. "I hope it won't be long before we can get out of this terrible country. No wonder it bears a bad name."

As Ted peered through the rolling billows of smoke at the crowd of Cocopahs who were relentlessly following, he had a feeling that there were many desperate experiences in store for them before they would ever be able to quit that ill-omened desert.

CHAPTER XIV.

N THE GULLLY.

Bud, trailing the led-horse with the bound prisoner, entered the gully in advance of the stampeding horses and mules. When he reached the hut, the racing live stock were almost upon him. Facing about, he placed himself advantageously to head them off; and so, with Ted and Stella behind, the frightened animals were soon secured.

Jimmie's horse was missing, and had been since early morning. Ted supposed that the animal had fallen into the hands of the Cocopahs. Yet, be that as it might, the rough riders had enough horses to bother with, just then, without Jimmie's.

Crowding the animals up under the ledge of rock, near the cabin wall, Ted and his pards roped them to the rocks. Taranch was removed from the back of the led-horse and taken into the hut. Stella was left there to guard him, and Ted and Bud scouted up and down the gully. When the two returned from their scout, it developed that they were hemmed in by Cocopahs on both sides.

Inasmuch as the walls of the gully were steep and unscalable, it looked very much as though they had been trapped.

"What in thunder did Jimmie send us in hyer fer?" growled Bud.

"He probably has some card or other up his sleeve," said the King of the Wild West. "Certainly he wouldn't send us into a trap unless he knew of some way for us to get out of it."

"D'ye reckon I'd turn them reds inter statoos ag'in I let loose with my forty-fours?"

"Try it," returned Ted, taking up a position that would enable him to see some of the Cocopahs down the gully. Bud lifted his revolvers and fired half a dozen shots in quick succession.

"What're they doin'?" he asked, when the echoes of the reports had died away.

"The spell has played out, Bud," said Ted, with a grim laugh. "There's a bunch of them stretched across the gully, down below, looking this way like hawks."

"Didn't face ther east, raise their arms, ner shut their eyes?" went on Bud.

"No."

"This hyer fool-bizness is givin' me ther blind staggers. Them reds never does things twicet alike. Where'd they git thet oil they poured on the rock?"

"Probably there is a well of it somewhere in the mountains."

"Must be springs, too. Them ombrays can't live without water. Then, ag'in, where do they git their chuck? I don't believe there's any game in these hills, kase there ain't nothin' fer game ter live on."

"There may be chuckwallahs. An Indian will live and grow fat on chuckwallahs."

A "chuckwallah" is a sort of edible lizard. Something, Ted might have added, that no one but an Indian would eat.

Ted and Bud, sitting in front of the hut, with their firearms in constant readiness for use, continued to watch both ends of the gully. It was far more comfortable in the defile than it was in the dead level of the desert, for there was shade in the gully, and a certain amount of coolness.

"Ted!" called Stella, from inside the hut.

"What is it, pard?" returned Ted

"Don't you think it would be well to dig a grave and [illegible] these—these bones away?"

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Ted, starting up, "I was for[illegible] about that."

Still keeping careful watch for the approach of enemies, the King of the Wild West and Bud carried the bones from the hut and buried them in a sand-flat near the base of the gully wall. Then, with the point of the pick, Ted laboriously chiseled the following inscription in the face of the wall, above the grave's head:

"Here Lies
DAVID WALKER
A Brave Man Slain
by Treachery."

"That is the best we can do, Bud," observed Ted sadly. "We have done all we can for David Walker, and we are doing all we can for David Walker's son."

"An' we're likewise puttin' in a lick er two fer law an' order by corrallin' Taranch," added Bud. "I'm plenty satisfied, but I wisht I knowed how Jimmie was goin' ter jine us, an' how we're goin' ter git out o' this hyer gash in ther hills."

That was exactly what the King of the Wild West would have liked to know. However, as they had plenty of food and water, now that the stolen water-cans and provisions had been recovered, they made themselves as comfortable as they could, and waited to hear from Jimmie.

The rest of that day dragged slowly. Ted and Bud remained constantly on guard outside the hut, while Stella continued to watch the prisoner inside.

No overt move was made against the rough riders by the red forces that had rounded them up. The Cocopahs appeared to be waiting for something, just as the rough riders were doing. Often they could be seen looking anxiously toward a nichelike opening in the gully wall, fifty feet sheer upward.

These actions were mysterious, but so many mysterious things had taken place in the Desert of Cocopah that Ted and his friends were not very deeply impressed.

Night fell blank and gloomy in the gulch, save where the opposite rim of the defile gave away enough to let a ray of moonlight flicker across the opposite gully wall, and down upon the front of the hut. The same ominous silence prevailed which the King of the Wild West had mournfully taken note of on the preceding night.

"I've got a feelin'," whispered Bud, "thet somethin' goin' ter happen!"

For once, Bud's "feelings" did not deceive him. He had hardly spoken before a low rumbling was heard, as of distant thunder. The sound was prolonged, grew in volume to deafening proportions, and then a huge object leaped from the opposite wall of the gully, bounded across the bottom of the defile, and smashed a hole in the front wall of the hut, missing Ted by less than a foot.

"[illegible] hills!" shouted Bud. "What was thet?"

"A big rock," said Ted. "The red whelps are tumbling [illegible] side of the wall over there, hoping to knock us into smithereens. All right in the hut, Stella?"

"Yes," the girl answered.

Again came the distant rumble, increasing to a terrific roar, and another boulder jumped clear of the wall in front and precipitated itself across the gully. This time the missile failed to hit the hut, but hurled in among the horses and mules. There followed a wild snorting and trampling of hoofs. Bud jumped to ascertain the damage, and came back with a long face.

"One o' ther cayuses was done up," he announced; one o' ther loaded critters we took from ther Cocopahs."

While Bud was speaking, three more boulders came charging down into the defile, two bounding into the front wall of the hut, and another going harmlessly wild in the darkness.

"We've got to stop this!" cried Ted. "The red fiends have hit upon something now that will put an end to us if we can't copper their game."

"There ain't a thing ter shoot at up above there," answered Bud. "All we can do, pard, is ter make a try at gittin' down ther gully. We can fight our way through——"

Bud ceased speaking suddenly, hunched himself together and drew a quick breath.

"Look!" he whispered hoarsely, pointing upward with a shaking finger.

Ted followed his pard's finger with his eyes. Something was standing in the niche, half-way up the wall—a white object, glowing diabolically in the moonlight, and shedding a ghastly, yellow radiance.

The thunder of the boulders was abruptly stilled. A sound of voices, rising in a sort of chant, came from up and down the gully. Then, high above the mournful monotone, was lifted a shrill, piercing wail:

"Wau Kean! Wau Kean! Wau Kean!"

"Great Cæsar's ghost!" muttered Ted. "That's supposed to be the spirit that owns the Hoard of the Cocopahs!"

The rough riders, standing side by side, continued to look upward, while the fearsome object in the niche raised one glowing arm and hand.

The wail died out, the chanting ceased, and again the ominous silence reigned.

CHAPTER XV.

INTO THE DESERT AGAIN.

"Cocopahs! listen, listen to the words of Wau Kean!"

A deep, nasal voice boomed the words from the niche. The voice intoned the words in Spanish, of which Ted and Bud knew enough to catch the speaker's drift.

In the silence following the words, an excited stir was heard from the deep shadows up and down the defile. The Indians were listening, excited, curious, and reverent.

"Children of the Desert, give heed to the words of Wau Kean, Ruler of the Hot Sands, Master of the Fierce Solano, Lord of the Golden Hoard! Lend ear and tremble, oh! you children of the waste who have strayed from the path which I have marked out for you!"

Groans broke out in the night, groans heavy with portent, proving how depressed with foreboding were the spirits of the Cocopahs.

"Ye have followed a false leader," went on the voice from the niche, "ye have slain the finder of the hoard, ye have killed, and robbed, and done much evil; and ye would add to the heavy sins I hold against ye the deaths of the gringoes in the gulch. Hold your hands, ye sons of evil! Ye have displeased me, and I shall never again appear to ye. Cease your groans, and hear what your punishment is to be!"

A chaos of wild lamentation had gone up from every side while the deep voice was booming from the niche. But abruptly this wail of mourning was smothered.

"Ye have forfeited the hoard," went on the voice, "for the gringoes will carry it with them beyond the desert. Your false leader they will also take, for he deserves death, and the gringoes will visit it upon him. And you, who have wrought so much evil, will go westward to the land of the pine nuts, where you will live forever. These mountains shall know ye no more. Harm not the gringoes. Depart forthwith, and depart in peace. I, Wau Kean, have spoken. As I have said, so let it be done!"

With the last word, the vision faded from the niche, leaving only the moonlight playing over the empty opening. A riotous chorus of lamentation arose from the Cocopahs; it died away slowly, and was taken up by the pounding of horses' hoofs receding into the distance from both ends of the gully. At last there was silence again, but it was not of such an ominous nature as it had been before.

"What in blazes do ye call thet?" mumbled Bud, staring blankly at the King of the Wild West.

"I have an idea," answered Ted, "that Jimmie Walker is back of that specter. Unless I am far wide of my trail, Jimmie has taught the superstitious Cocopahs a lesson they'll never forget. He has shown them how to be honest in a way that will be handed down from one generation to another among the Cocopahs, and will do them a lot of good."

"Jimmie! Well, if thet was him, then all I can say is his voice must hev growed some since he left us last night."

"It wasn't Jimmie's voice, of course; but——"

At that precise instant, however, Jimmie's voice was clearly heard and there was no mistake about it.

"Hey, below there!" The voice floated down from the gullyside.

"Hello, yourself, Jimmie!" called Ted.

"Wasn't that a hot one, Ted? I'm class A as understudy for Wau Kean, don't you think?"

"Was that you?"

"I was the boy in white, with the phosphorus front. Sure it was me. Didn't think your Uncle Jimmie was a dead one, did you?"

"Well, we didn't know what to think."

"Ye've had us guessin' ever since last night, kid," struck in Bud.

Jimmie laughed.

"I've had the whole bunch guessin'," he called down.

"But who's bazoo was thet?" went on Bud. "It wasn't your'n, I'll bet a stack o' blues on thet."

"No, it wasn't mine. I was the specter, and Sanchez furnished the voice."

"Sanchez?" repeated Ted inquiringly. "Who's Sanchez?"

"A greaser pal o' Taranch's who wants to be white from now on. I told him he could have leg-bail if he'd help me. You've got to stand by that, Ted."

"Of course I'll stand by it."

"Any one get touched up with the fallin' rocks?"

"No; but if you hadn't showed up just when you did, the reds would probably have done for us."

"Nothin' to fear from them now. They're pounding away to the woods where the pine-nuts grow. And they're forty miles from here, as the crow flies," Jimmie laughed.

"Why don't you come down, Jimmie, and talk with us at close range?"

"Can't! If Sanchez and I could have got out, we'd have been with you a long while ago."

"What's the matter?"

"We're locked in; the wall's too steep for us to climb down, it's too far to jump, and our wings ain't in good workin'-order."

"Can't we help you? Perhaps we could get the end of a rope up there to you in some way——"

"You won't have to do that. On the west end of the hut you'll see a big rock. Pry it away, and we'll come breezin' out."

Ted and Bud found the rock. It was snug up against the gully wall, and it took all their strength to roll it out of the way. When the rock was pushed aside, a natural opening, some three feet across, was revealed in the wall.

A moment later Jimmie came rolling out of the hole, quickly followed by a grizzly-looking Mexican. Jimmie shook hands with Ted and Bud, presented Sanchez, and then asked for Stella.

"Here, Jimmie!" called Stella, from the broken front wall of the hut.

Jimmie rushed to the girl and grabbed her by both hands.

"Say!" he exclaimed, "if anythin' had gone crossways with you, I don't know what I'd have done. All right, are you?"

"Of course, Jimmie! How did you come to be walled up inside the cliff like that?"

"I'll spiel that out to you later; but if we're going to make tracks across the desert to-night, we'd better be about it. I don't hanker after travelin' across the hot sands very much durin' daylight."

"Jimmie's right about that," spoke up the King of the Wild West. "We'll have to shift the packs and make ready for our return trip. We have your gold, Jimmie."

"That hoard has been the least o' my worries," answered the boy. "I got you into this mess of trouble, and all that was botherin' me was how to get you out again."

"Well," laughed Ted, "we're out now—or we will be as soon as we reach the Cañon of Palms across that stretch of sand."

There were four mules and six horses, including the three cayuses taken from the Cocopahs, together with Taranch's mount, and counting out the animal that had been killed by the falling rocks.

The mule-packs, on the other hand, had been growing lighter as provisions and water were consumed. Two water-cans were empty, and could be discarded. These heavy cans nearly offset the added weight of the hoard, so the mules were not loaded any more heavily on the return journey than they were on the trip out.

Thus there was a mount apiece, all around, although Jimmie, in lieu of his own horse, had to makeshift with a Cocopah cayuse, for which a rope hackamore was hastily twisted.

Taranch, who had kept a sullen silence ever since his capture, was bound upright in his saddle, and Bud continued to be his captor.

Sanchez rode another of the Cocopah horses.

It was with a feeling of intense satisfaction that the rough riders finally put the cavalcade in motion and started down the gully.

Suddenly Jimmie pulled on the hackamore of his horse and came to a halt.

"What's ther matter with ye, kid?" asked Bud.

"I forgot something," said Jimmie, in a low tone. "There's somethin' I got to do back in that hut—somethin' it is my duty to do, an' I'm not goin' to leave till it's done. Ride on, an' I'll overtake you."

"I think I know what you mean, Jimmie," spoke up Ted. "Bud and I attended to that."

"Where did you put him?" asked Jimmie, a sad undernote in his voice.

"In the sand-flat, near the hut; and we marked the cliff face above him in a way you'd approve of, I think, if you saw it."

"That was good of you," said Jimmie, reaching out a grateful hand to the King of the Wild West. "You seem to think of everything, Ted Strong."

Then the little procession continued on, passed out at the mouth of the gully, and rounded the base of Mushroom Rock. Here the peculiar smell of burned petroleum still lingered. Stella looked up at the top of the rock with a shiver, and goaded her horse to a quicker pace.

"Sanchez and I piped off what happened here," spoke up Jimmie; "we could see about everything that took place around Mushroom Rock from that hole in the top of the gully wall."

"Why did the Cocopahs do—what they did?" asked Stella.

"It is their way, señorita," answered Sanchez. "That is their funeral-rock. Their dead are put on the top, the rock is covered with oil, and the torch applied."

"It's a horrible custom!" declared Stella.

"Superstitious people always have horrible customs," put in Ted. "Why don't the Cocopahs use firearms, Sanchez?"

"It is a tradition that Wau Kean, the god of the desert, will not permit it," answered Sanchez, who had been mixed up with the Cocopahs long enough to have learned a good deal about them. "The Cocopahs say," proceeded Sanchez, "that whenever a weapon is fired in the desert, Wau Kean hears, and is angry. If shooting happens, then the Cocopahs stop whatever they are doing, look toward their funeral-rock, and pray a long time for Wau Kean to be merciful."

"I'm beginnin' ter put two an' a couple tergether," cut in Bud. "It's plain, now, why they stopped fightin' with us out there in ther desert, Ted, an' give us time ter make off with our stolen cattle, an' with the hoard, an' Taranch. Thet's where superstition allowed us ter run in a good-sized tally."

"Superstition has helped us wonderfully in this little set-to with the Cocopahs," added Ted. "Does Wau Kean often appear to the Cocopahs, Sanchez?"

"Not often, señor. Wau Kean has not appeared to them for many months until to-night."

By then the cavalcade was well on its way across the desert.

The pack mules, understanding that they were on their way home, followed their leader at a brisk pace, and needed no driving. Bud, with Taranch in tow, trailed along after the mules. Behind Taranch rode Sanchez, and every once in a while the captured leader of the desperadoes would twist in his saddle and give Sanchez a look of withering hate and animosity. Sanchez, however, seemed utterly indifferent to these attentions of his deposed leader.

Stella, Jimmie, and Ted rode close to Sanchez.

"Now that we're fairly started for Tajo," spoke up the King of the Wild West, "I think Jimmie has time to tell us what happened to him. That ought to make the journey shorter."

All the rest were of this opinion.

"Well," remarked Jimmie, "if you're ready for the spiel, here goes!"

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW JIMMIE MADE GOOD.

"No one but a prize gilly would have started up that gulch, same as I did, last night," began Jimmie; "but I git feeble-minded, now and then, and I guess that was one of the times.

"I forgot about Taranch, and forgot about the Cocopahs. The gun belongin' to El Lobo, which Handy turned over to me, set me feelin' that I was all to the good, and I was ready to knock off any chip that got into my line of vision.

"Sometimes a kid is like that, although a man o' my size ought to know better than to swell around, just because he's got a piece o' loaded hardware at his hip. It's a bad thing, honest. As a gen'ral thing, when a kid that hasn't any use for a gun takes to totin' one, he's a coward—you take it from me.

"Well, anyway, I had the shooter, together with a hazy notion that I could stand off anything that walked. Along with that, I wanted to see the hut where dad had lived, and I wanted to find out if there was anything there that I ought to do.

"I found the hut easy enough, and I saw what was in it. I had to sit down for a spell beside what I found there, an' think how foolish it was for a man to sell his life for yellow metal—even six bags of it; and I had to think how much better satisfied I'd have been if I could have pushed out my hand and gripped dad's, like I used to, 'stead o' pikin' into that jumpin'-off place lookin' for the hoard.

"I slacked up on that line o' thought after a while, and pulled up the flat stone he told about in his letter. There was a white kimono under the stone, made out o' canvas sacking, an' along with that a bottle o' phosphorus. I had a think that I'd better hang on to that spirit-rig, as it

[illegible] pushed back the stone, when Sanchez jumped in an' [illegible]

"Sanchez?" spoke up Stella quic[illegible]

"Sure, but he didn't mean it," went on Jimmie. "I let out a yell, an' reached for that shooter: but it might as well have been in Tajo, for all the good it did me. As I reached for the gun, Sanchez reached for my arm.

"'Don't be foolish, kid,' [illegible] Sanchez. 'I'm [illegible] friend; see? Taranch is in the gully, an' sent me in here to put you on the mat. But I'm tired of Taranch,' he says, 'an' I want to play square from this on. Shake yourself together,' he says, 'an' we'll take a *pasear* down the gulch an' back to your friends."

"We started, but hadn't any more'n got clear of the hut door than a buck ringed us with the balsas. We untied ourselves from the rope, an' found the cut full o' shadows rushin' toward us. You see, the Cocopahs were next to Sanchez tryin' to make a get-away an' helpin' me to do the same.

"Sanchez saw that quick enough, an' he pulled me to that hole in the wall, pushed me in, and crawled along behind. But the Cocopahs had seen us take to the cliff. They rolled that rock across the hole, an' thought they had us done up an' planted, both at the same time.

"Sanchez, though, knew more about that hole than the reds did. He told me to keep climbin', an' I all-foured my way up an' up till I thought I must have climbed a thousand miles. Then I saw moonlight, an' pushed through onto that ledge.

"Sanchez an' I couldn't get down the side of the cliff, an' there was a cork in the neck o' the bottle down below. Taranch, if he knew where the hole led to, didn't dare to come in, for fear I'd shoot. So there was Sanchez an' me, perfectly safe an' perfectly helpless.

"It was a lucky thing that Sanchez had a canteen of water an' some jerked beef in that rock burrow. If he hadn't had that there we couldn't have lasted as long as we did."

"What sort of a thing was thet rock burrow, kid?" queried Bud.

"Nothin' but a fault in the rock, Bud," replied Jimmie. "Just a plain fissure, manufactured at the time the mountain was hove up. I think dad must have been the first discoverer of it, an' that maybe he used the place for playin' spook with the reds. Anyhow, there it was, an' there was Sanchez an' me in it, with a cork at the bottom an' a hole at the top that wouldn't lead us anywhere.

"While we stood on the ledge, we could look off to'rds Mushroom Rock, an' we could hear the song and dance Taranch was givin' out. He said he had me hard an' fast, you remember? An' that if you'd go away an' leave the hoard, he'd see that wanderin' Willie was returned to his bereaved friends. That's what led me to put up that holler. When I'd hollered once, Sanchez allowed that that ought to do. If I did too much talkin', Taranch an' the reds might locate us, an' make us uncomfortable.

"Well, we stayed in that hole all night and a good share of the next day before we gave up wonderin' if we couldn't tear our clothes into strips an' make a rope. Sanchez's whole suit wouldn't have supported a two-pound weight; an' Stella copped out this suit for me, an' I wasn't goin' to make strips out of it.'

"'We'll wait, San, ole boy,' says I, 'an' pretty soon Ted Strong'll come after us.'

"So we hung on until we saw that fire at the rock, an' the Cocopahs crowdin' in on you; then I had the nerve to let off another yell. That was all Sanchez thought advisable. He was thinkin' all the time we might work that ghost-racket, an' if the reds had thought we were up there, they wouldn't have stood for that imitation of Wau Kean which we pulled off.

"After a while we saw just how things were comin'. The Cocopahs were bunched on each side of you, an' they had you cornered. Before they began rolling the rocks down, Sanchez an' I was wonderin' what sort of cards they had up their sleeves. The sounds of the falling stones gave us the tip, and then I scrambled into that ghost-uniform and rubbed myself with phosphorus.

"I had got pretty chummy with Sanchez while we were cooped up in that hole. He'd been a friend to me, and I had told him all about the hoard, an' about the letter dad wrote and sent to Ensenada by carrier-pigeon, an' about how Stella Fosdick had picked me up, and had got the rough riders to give me a boost, an' all that.

"So, when the time came for me to appear an' stop the rock-rollin', Sanchez had figured out what he was goin' to say. I guess you heard how he said it. Greaser lingo ain't my long suit, an' he might just as well have been talkin' Chink or Choctaw, so far as I was able to connect with what he said. He told me afterward what it all meant, an' say, it was sure all right, wasn't it?

"I guess that winds the thing up. You know what happened after the Cocopahs left just as well as I do. We're every one of us safe, we've got the hoard, you've got Taranch, El Lobo is in Handy's care, an' the Cocopahs have gone off to gather pine-nuts, with a hunch that they'd better be good from now on. Has any one got any kick comin'?"

No one had. Jimmie was congratulated, and a good deal of interest had been aroused in Sanchez. The latter saw that he was expected to say something, so he spoke up.

"I used to know Taranch in the days when we were vaqueros together. *Si señors*, he was a good man then. When he took to stealing cattle, I was of those who chased him off the range. Later I met him—that was after Señor Walker, Jimmie's *padre*, had been put out of the way—and Taranch he asked me to remember old [illegible] come and be one of the band.

"I was out of *dinero;* I was desperate; so I say *'Si,'* and go with my old comrade. For months I was *muy malo,* señors; then I grow sick of it all, and I tell Taranch I will not stay with him, that I go away and be an honest vaquero. He curse me, and he will not let me go. So I stay with him, waiting for a chance to run away and get across the desert. When he send me to kill the boy Jimmie, I know my chance has come. The rest you know."

"Were you with Taranch, Sanchez," asked Ted, "when he ran from Campo?"

"No, señor. El Lobo and two others were with him, but not me. Taranch would not trust me across the desert."

"El Lobo was captured; but what became of the other two who were with Taranch that night?"

"Killed, señor, in the fight with the Americano sheriff."

"Did Taranch know that I and my friends were coming with Jimmie to get the hoard of the Cocopahs?"

"*Si,* he find that out. He was in Campo, señor, when the señorita and Jimmie arrive. He find the boy's name is Walker; then he think it out. Taranch, he is as sharp as a steel trap, yes. I have been acquainted with him a long time, and I know."

"Taranch," went on Ted, addressing the prisoner, "why did you send that note on the arrow?" The prisoner swore under his breath, but gave no other answer. "You ordered me to keep away from the Desert of Cocopah, when, all the time, you were eager to have me come and show you where David Walker had cached the Hoard of the Cocopahs."

"Por Dios!" hissed the prisoner, for the first time allowing himself to speak. "I knew what kind you were—I knew if I order you away you will have come all the more. Now lis'en: I will escape from the *rurales;* and, when I have find myself free, then I come after you, Ted Strong, an' I made you pay for this. *Si!* And I will have the life of Sanchez, too. I have said, me, Taranch!"

That was the only speech Taranch made while he was in the hands of the rough riders.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE END OF THE TRAIL.

The greaser population was again at the windows and doors of Tajo, rubbing their eyes and staring. They could hardly believe the evidences of their senses.

Who were those riding along the street? Señor Ted Strong, the brave Americano, and the *mujercita*—his girl ward—and Bud Morgan, the rough rider, and the *nino,* Jimmie? And was that Taranch, the man who burned, and robbed, and murdered, that they were bringing in with them?

It was! There could be no doubt.

Filled with joy, the whole town turned itself loose in the streets, shouting and hurrahing for Ted Strong and his brave rough riders! They had penetrated the desert, and they had returned alive, bringing Taranch with them! Taranch was no more to be dreaded, and this knowledge filled them all with delight.

Sanchez was not with Ted and his friends. Sanchez was known in Tajo, and he felt that it would not be well for him to go to the town; so he had turned southward from the Cañon of the Palms, determined to lead an honest life, and carrying the good wishes of the Americanos with him.

Taranch was turned over to a company of rurales who happened to be in Tajo at the time of the rough riders' return.

"Don't let him get away from you," said Ted to the captain of the Mexican company.

The captain smiled an inscrutable smile, and one hour later the rough riders, who had again accepted the hospitality of their old host, heard a rattling volley of musketry.

"What is that?" asked Ted.

Their host smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Taranch," he explained, "has got away from the rurales;" then added, with a significant smile, "but in the spirit, señors. His body, I am sure, is riddled with bullets."

That is exactly what had happened. Mexican justice is quick and decisive. Nevermore would the murderous Mexican harry the country around the Desert of Cocopah.

As might be supposed, Ted and his party had experienced some discomfort in crossing the desert on their homeward journey, but nothing to compare with what they had suffered on their outward trip. Gaining the Cañon de las Palmas in the forenoon, they had rested and recuperated, and then gone on to Tajo in the afternoon.

After a night in Tajo, they set out with the sunrise for Campo minus their prisoner. The news of what had happened had preceded them, and they were met by Sheriff Handy, who was in the saddle for the first time since he had been wounded during his clash with Taranch. Handy rode out to meet the returning rough riders.

"Hooray!" he whooped, as soon as he caught sight of Ted and his friends; "hooray fer ther King o' ther Wild West and his rough riders! Ye done it, Ted Strong, an' I could hev sworn ye'd never come back from ther desert alive."

"It takes more'n a buckskin string an' two lead balls ter wind up ther rough riders, Handy," chuckled Bud.

"You got wound up twice in a contrivance of that kind, Bud," chirped the grinning Jimmie.

"Hesh!" growled Bud. "I've heern tell thet kids o' yore size ort ter be seen an' not heerd."

"You've heard, then," said Ted to Handy, "that we brought in Taranch?"

"Why," answered the sheriff, "by now the news is all over Mexico an' Californy. Thar's a bad man out o' the runnin', an' everybody is pleased an' satersfied—no one more so than your'n truly."

"What has become of El Lobo?"

"He'll be tried in a month er two, an' then, in another month er two, he'll be legally strung up."

"Things ain't so swift in our kentry as what they are below ther line," commented Bud: "but the ole stars an' tripes suits me best, arter all."

"What's in them bags?" inquired the sheriff, peering at the loaded pack mules.

"The Hoard of the Cocopahs."

"Go on!" exclaimed the sheriff, staring. "I've heerd thet yarn, but I never took no stock in it."

"Well," laughed Ted, "after this you can take all the stock in it you want to, Handy. There's the hoard, in those bags, at least $60,000 of it."

The sheriff almost tumbled out of his saddle.

"Whose is it?" he gasped. "your'n?"

"It's Jimmie's. Jimmie's father found it, paid his life for it, and my girl pard began the fight for it. There it is, Handy, and every ounce belongs to Jimmie Walker. We're taking it to the nearest express-office for him."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" exclaimed Sheriff Handy, staring at the rough riders as though they represented a phenomenon that had never before crossed his orbit. "Say, fer gettin' a hurricane hustle on, an' doin' things all shipshape an' proper, you fellers is ther clear quill. Thet's right! Shake, shake all around!"

They shook all around. While they were doing it, Handy continued to air his views.

"Everybody said thar wasn't no Hoard o' the Cocopahs, an' hyer you fellers come breezin' inter this out o' the way corner o' Californy, an' prove thet everybody is wrong. Then, ag'in, everybody allows the Desert o' Cocopah can't be crossed an' recrossed, but hyer ye've come an' done it! An' then, too, everybody north an' south o' the line said thet Taranch couldn't be ketched, an' once more you ombrays scored. Oh, shucks! Ye make me feel like my leetle career as sher'f wasn't wuth a hoot. I shore kain't stack up with ye. Thet's right."

Like Tajo, Campo became a scene of rejoicing. The rough riders were made more of, in that little town, than they had ever been before, and the whole town came in a body and asked them to stay in the place for a week, so that they could be properly entertained.

But there was business ahead of Ted. The custody of six bags of nuggets, in that sparsely settled region, was a heavy responsibility, and he wanted to get rid of the responsibility as soon as possible.

They stayed one night in Campo, then set forth, and, in due course, put in at San Diego. From there the nuggets were shipped by express to the United States Mint at San Francisco. At the present time it is quite likely that the Hoard of the Cocopahs is circulating about the country in the form of United States gold pieces.

But that is neither here nor there. The fact that most concerns the actors in the recent lively experiences that had to do with the hoard is this: Jimmie Walker received a draft from the government for $72,000, which shows that Ted and Bud were rather poor hands at guessing.

Jimmie was rich. But such a streak of luck did not turn his head. He was the same old Jimmie, and always would be.

Ted and his friends accompanied Jimmie to Denver. There a guardian and trustee was appointed for the boy, and Ted saw to it that the judge appointed a good man.

Jimmie wanted to go to Moon Valley with the rough riders, and become a cattleman under Ted's supervision. Ted tried to talk him out of the notion, and so did Bud, but they were powerless to persuade him. It took Stella to do that. After she had had a heart-to-heart talk with the boy, he made up his mind that he would stay in Denver, go to school, and fit himself to take care of his money properly when he came of age.

From Denver the rough riders returned direct to South Dakota and the home ranch. For a "man of ten," Jimmie's feelings got a little the best of him when he came to say good-by to Ted, Bud, and particularly Stella.

As Jimmie expressed it, "Stella had made all kinds of a hit" with him, and he hated to see her go.

"Honest," said Jimmie, winking hard as he bid the rough riders good-by in the railroad-station, "I'd like to cop out a ranch next door to your'n, in the Black Hills, an' go to herdin' cattle. But Stella's talked me out o' that, an' I'm goin' to do as she says—git an education, an' try an' make somethin' out o' myself. But, on the level, there ain't nothin' I'd like to be so much as King o' the Wild West Number Two. You fellers have treated me white, an' I ain't never going to forget you.

"As for Stella——"

Jimmie turned to the girl and tucked a watch into her hand, a little gem of a watch, with a big diamond set in the case.

"Read what it says inside," he said, then gulped hard and made a quick run to get out of the station.

And this was the inscription engraved on the inner case:

"Presented by Jimmie Walker to the Brave Girl Who Helped Him Win the Hoard of the Cocopahs."

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 169, is entitled "King of the Wild West's Blacksnake Brand: or, Stella at Bay in the Old Mining-camp."

A CHAT WITH YOU.

EDITORIAL NOTE.—The deluge of letters of praise pouring into our editorial rooms has impelled us to open this department, where, from week to week, we may meet our multitude of enthusiastic young [illegible] and answer various questions concerning sports afield. If you desire to know [illegible] connected with outdoor life, hunting, fishing, fur [illegible] or cowboy life on the plains, [illegible] who are thoroughly posted [illegible] the open. In many cases we may [illegible] letters, but it shall be our aim to print everything that we believe must prove of interest to the great body of our readers.

(Winner of one of the Five Dollar Prizes.)

I remember reading the first number of the "Rough Rider Weekly" published, and how charmed I was at that time with its fine descriptions of wild Western life.

Since that time, although I have not been a regular reader, I [illegible] month read several numbers, but I now propose to become one of the regulars.

Ted Strong is, [illegible], a noble example of sturdy American [illegible], and his endeavors as a United States marshal to keep peace on the border are interesting.

Kit Summers is a good second in his efforts. Then there is Jim Morton. Dear old Bud, what would the stories be without his stories of "Bud on the Rio Pecos"?

[illegible] tale of the swell Chicago restaurant and the bill of fare was [illegible].

Although I thought the girls introduced in the earlier numbers O. K., the creation of Stella is immense. She gives a new spice to the tales, being always on hand just in the nick of time.

May the day come when Ted may be united to some fair maiden, for surely Ted Strong deserves the first maiden the world possesses.

To a person reading these stories one can almost feel the noble saddle-horse under him, and race along with the lads in their efforts to head off stampeded cattle, or to stop law-breakers.

The hand of Providence seems to watch over Ted, for he comes out of the most marvelous adventures, with the help of the Moon Valley boys, or his girl pard, Stella.

All honor to Mr. Ned Taylor, and to Street & Smith for giving to the American youth these stirring stories of real Western life.

I remain ever, a true well-wisher of the weekly.

91 West Foster Street, Palmyra, N. Y. CLARENCE WOOD.

So much can be learned from the "Rough Rider Weekly" that one does not realize to what an extent a person can gain knowledge of the West until he reads Ned Taylor's stories regularly.

(Winner of one of the Five Dollar Prizes.)

Why do I like stories in the "Rough Rider Weekly" better than other stories of Western life?

I like it for the stirring adventures that befall the young rough riders.

It is a better weekly than any other library of Western adventure published, because Ted Strong is the ideal Western hero. He does not kill five or six men every week, as the heroes of other so-called "true stories of Western adventure" do, but he is often in tight places, and, though he would be justified, always gets out with as little bloodshed as possible. He is a dead shot, fears nothing, is full of resource, protects the weak, suppresses crime, and, although he sometimes makes mistakes, his perseverance and luck always bring him out ahead.

Then he has a set of friends that can't be beaten, and with their aid he accomplishes whatever he undertakes. His chums are doubly interesting, because they are true types of young Westerners.

As the author is a Western man, the descriptions of the West, of its people and animals are positively true. One who has a file of "Rough Riders" has a Western encyclopedia, and, if he wishes to know the climate, products, and people of any Western State, all he has to do is to read the number in which Ted is in that State.

To sum up my reasons for liking this weekly: First, it contains tales of thrilling adventures, and each number has new ones in it; second, Ted and his friends are such interesting char- [illegible] information about the West [illegible]

JOHN ALFORD.

[illegible], Michigan

"The letter writers" tell you a great deal about the merits of the "Rough Rider Weekly." It is, as John says, an encyclopedia of [illegible] on Western subjects.

(Winner of one of the Two Dollar Prizes.)

Were I asked why I like Ted Strong and the novel way in which he appears in the "Rough Rider Weekly," I could but say, "I dunno." He is one a boy should emulate.

I know the life of the ranchero and vaquero. Mr. Taylor's descriptions are not exaggerated.

Just think of a ten-mile ride over the plains to one's front gate.

Wherever one finds cattle, one finds the cowboy. The old Santa Fé trail could tell many a tale of happy camp-fires with the great herds lingering near.

The open prairie [illegible] and [illegible], but still the puncher lingers. [illegible] at Cheyenne, Wyo. E. C. KNOX.

614 West Kiowa Street, Colorado Springs

The writer of this letter has been a cow-puncher, and knows every detail of the life our author describes so vividly in the pages of the "Rough Rider Weekly."

(Winner of one of the Two Dollar Prizes.)

I am a veteran reader of the "Rough Rider Weekly," which contains the most interesting Western literature published. Ned Taylor, the author of this great book, is one of the few writers of fiction for youth who can make his works [illegible] hold the reader from "Chapter One" to "The End." I have followed the hero, Ted Strong, through his many adventures in the West, up north into Alaska, down south into Mexico, feeling as if I, myself, were with him, sharing his trials and triumphs. When I come to the close, I wish that it was time for the next number of the "Rough Rider Weekly," so that I might again be with Ted and his brave rough riders.

Of the other rough riders, there is not one which I would be ashamed to call my friend.

Each succeeding issue of the "Rough Rider Weekly" seems to be more interesting than the last. In conclusion, I will say that I do not miss a chance to speak a good word for the weekly, and close, wishing it a long and successful life.

755 Grand Street, Brooklyn, N. Y. FRANK SCHMIDT.

This is enthusiastic praise from one of the regular readers of this famous weekly.

(Winner of one of the Two Dollar Prizes.)

No one appreciates the "Rough Rider Weekly" more than I do. I have always treasured it so much, and have also found ways and means to persuade my friends to read it. But I am not sure I can express just how much I like it. The stories are so full of vim and vigor, week in and week out, one [illegible] is always right in the thick of every fray that is [illegible] story. When I also tell you that I, along with [illegible] other boys that read this magnificent weekly, would like nothing better than to be a rough rider, then you will know how much we all like it. I must say that it holds the reader's attention and admiration, from cover to cover, and when the last chapter is reached, I may truthfully say that some time I think I can never await the coming of the next issue.

Long live Mr. Ned Taylor and Street & Smith.

Saltillo, Miss. J. CLIFFORD ARMSTRONG.

Another interesting letter from the land of cotton and sugar-cane.

Yours of April 10th, informing me that I had won first prize in the Rough Rider Letter Competition, received. Permit me to thank you heartily for the $20 check, which accompanied the letter. I assure you that I will prize the letter long after the prize is forgotten. That I should win out in a contest with thousands of boys all over the United States, is, to me, almost incredible, although I went into the contest with the determination to win, if possible, and was assured of a square deal in any contest you might conduct. In order to further show my appreciation, I shall endeavor at all times to boost your publications.

Entirely aside from the contest, I wish to state, that according to my idea a book of any kind—good or bad—will benefit the reader, provided he is possessed of the right kind of a mind. Most of my education has been acquired by reading—I attended school but part of two years—and had I failed to take advantage of the opportunity presented by your popular line of low-priced books, I should probably never have been able to write a letter which would be selected from thousands as the best.

Again thanking you for your liberality, I beg to remain,
Yours, for a big boom in Street & Smith publications.
Lexington, Nebraska. EDWARD S. HOLMES.

We are glad that you have derived so much benefit from our publications and wish you success in all future undertakings.

I like Stella, who has got plenty of nerve and grit, and knows how to take care of herself. Next comes Ted, who cannot be beaten with gun or wit. Beanpole is laughable, but Ben Tremont is a true friend. Mr. Taylor knows how to tell a story that interests every one. If I can obtain a Tip Top badge at this late date, please let me know. EUGENE MILLER.
New York City, N. Y.

You can still get a Tip Top League badge, though the supply is limited.

I think that the "Rough Rider Weekly" has the best Western ranch and all-round Western stories for the boys of the West, East, North, and South, as well as for the men.

I think Ted Strong is the ideal of young manhood. He has a "will of his own," but is not pig-headed.

Stella is an ideal young woman, just the one for Ted.

The other characters are admirably suited to the story.

One day when I went to a news-stand to get a magazine for my aunt, I was attracted by the cover of a "Rough Rider Weekly," and, having a nickel in my pocket, I bought it. That night I did not have anything to read, so I commenced it, and did not stop until I had finished it. The clock said twenty minutes after eleven, and my usual bed-hour is nine to nine-thirty. The next morning my "Rough Rider" was nowhere to be seen until I found my brother in the coldest room in the house reading it on the floor! FARANT TODD.
Norfolk, Va.

This is a very interesting letter from a thirteen-year-old boy who enjoys reading the "Rough Rider Weekly."

(A letter from Ohio.)

I have read your "Rough Rider Weekly" for about two years, and I think it is the best weekly of the West in print. I like all the characters. I like Ted Strong the best. Ted is an athlete, and stands up for law and order. He never kills a man if he can help it. He is kind-hearted, does not drink or chew, and is kind to wounded enemies. Stella is next best. She is beautiful, full of fun, and is brave, and can ride a horse as well as a man. Ben, Bud, Kit, Bob, and Carl are all right. They are the best I ever read about. The "Rough Rider Weekly" teaches young boys to be law-abiding citizens. Ted sets an example to be followed by thousands of boys all over the world. I have started a great many boys to reading the "Rough Rider Weekly," and I am trying to get more to read it. Please send me your latest catalogue to my address. J. E. MARSHALL JACKSON.

There is nothing objectionable in these stories. On the other hand, there is not one number of the "Rough Rider Weekly" which does not show that the honest, law-abiding man wins, and that bad persons come to grief through their misdeeds.

(A letter from Illinois.)

I have been a reader of the "Rough Rider Weekly" from No. 1 up to date, and think it is an ideal publication for young people of either sex. The upright and honorable character of Ted Strong and his cowboy friends never fails to attract the admiration of every reader who loves a good, clean, wholesome, and exciting story. Since I began reading the "Rough Rider Weekly" I have induced many of my friends to take the paper by lending them my old numbers. At first my father did not approve of my reading the "Rough Rider Weekly," but I gave him "Ted Strong on the Trail; or, The Cattlemen of Salt Licks," and now he reads every number as eagerly as I do. I should like to see every boy in the country become a reader of this magazine. Just from reading about Ted Strong's manly habits I have quit smoking cigarettes, and I thank Ned Taylor for it. One who can write such stories must have seen a great deal of the wild free life of the plains.

I remain, an ardent admirer of the best of all weeklies, the "Rough Rider," JOE RENDER.

There is never anything objectional in the "Rough Rider" stories. When the older members of a family, who might be slightly prejudiced before reading a boys' story, pick up a copy of the "Rough Rider Weekly" they soon find out that these romances make clean, wholesome reading for their boys and girls.

(A letter from Maine.)

I have just read the last "Rough Rider." It is the greatest weekly in the world for adventure. It is interesting all the way through. My father does not own a horse, so I walk five miles every week to get it. When you start on one you keep on reading till you read it through. Ted and Stella are all right. I like them best of all. I would choose the "Rough Rider" out of a thousand other weeklies. I have read it from No. 1 up to the present number.

The covers are all right.

Ted does not do the same thing over and over, like the heroes of other weeklies I have read. I have not time to write any more, though I could write all day about it. Please send me a catalogue of your five-cent weeklies. Wishing Ted luck,
ROY YOUNG.

We have sent you a catalogue.

Having read your "Rough Rider Weekly" from No. 1 to the present number, I think they are very good.

I like Ted, Bud, Ben, and Kit best, although the rest are brave fellows, too. I always wonder what became of Doc Fenton, as I don't hear about him now.

Ned Taylor is a great Western writer. He tells all facts about the great West.

I would be very glad if you would give me Ted's address.
STEVE J. LEHOSKY.

Doc Fenton is with the young rough riders on their trips, but lately has not been very much in evidence. Ted's permanent address is Moon Valley Ranch, South Dakota.

(A letter from Scotland.)

I have read a good many books of all kinds, but I think that the "Rough Rider" is the best of all books. I got a loan of a "Rough Rider" from a friend, and I have read the weekly ever since. The first "Rough Rider" I read was "King of the Wild West's Strange Quest; or, The White Princess of Sonora."
GEORGE ADAM.

This letter came all the way from the land of Bobbie Burns, where we have a great number of readers.

I have read "Rough Rider Weekly" for a long time. It is the most interesting and fascinating of all five-cent books.
Chicago, Ill. WALTER MARGGRAF.

Ted Strong, King of the Wild West, is ever popular with our Chicago readers.

I am a reader of many books. The "Rough Rider Weekly" is one of the best books ever published. I hope that Ned Taylor lives many years, and I wish good luck to Ted Strong and his rough riders. CHARLES BANNASCH.
Baltimore, Md.

Ted thanks you for your kind words and sends his regards. He hopes that you will always remain an interested reader of his numerous adventures.

(A letter from New York.)

I have read all numbers of "Rough Rider Weekly" from 1 to date, and I find it the best Western magazine at the price. Your library holds the attention of readers from chapter to chapter, and is a sure cure for the blues.

Mr. Taylor is an interesting writer, and gives his readers a big five cents' worth every time!

The characters are good, Bud and Ted being my favorites. The things they do are not impossible. While they can't defeat all the bad men of the earth at once, they are fast enough for me. I bought a "Rough Rider Weekly" to-day, and will get one next Friday, too. OSCAR SACHRISON.

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How the Early Numbers of the TIP TOP WEEKLY May Be Secured

TO the boys who take interest in the adventures of Frank Merriwell and want to read everything that was written about him, we desire to say that numbers 1 to 325 of the **Tip Top Weekly** containing his early adventures are entirely out of stock and will not be reprinted. These numbers, however, were published in the Medal Library beginning with No. 150 which is entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays." We give herewith a complete list of all the Merriwell stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing.

We will send a complete catalogue of the Medal Library, which is just full of good things for boys, on receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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150—Frank Merriwell's Schooldays.
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401—Frank Merriwell in Kentucky.
404—Frank Merriwell's Power.
407—Frank Merriwell's Shrewdness.
410—Frank Merriwell's Set-back.

Published About May 27th

413—Frank Merriwell's Search.

Published About June 17th

416—Frank Merriwell's Club.

Published About July 8th

419—Frank Merriwell's Trust.

Published About July 29th

422—Frank Merriwell's False Friend.

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